

**THE ORAL CHRIST OF SHEMBE:  
BELIEVING IN JESUS IN ORAL AND LITERATE  
SOCIETIES.**

**JA Loubser**

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**1. Christology and social reality**

Our immediate challenge in South Africa is to balance the need for a redistribution of wealth with a regeneration of the economy; to stimulate democratic creativity and conflict while still preserving law and order. This is especially difficult because in this country we speak to one another from different ages - as is also the case at the UN.

Even with forced segregation gone and the question of exploitation gradually being addressed, there still remains a deep cultural division. This is a division not so much between black and white/African and European, but between traditional and modern society, between pre- or semi-literate and literate society.

In building ecumenical bridges between different sections of our population, an awareness of the socio-cultural conventions underlying our varying theologies, and especially christologies, is indispensable. It is in this regard that I will attempt to make a contribution.<sup>1</sup>

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1. In a thought-provoking article, the social anthropologist, Edmund Leach, relates two types of early Christology to two differing sociological realities. I found this connection of Christology to social reality most illuminating, because until now "the seemingly endless debate about the nature of the Trinity and the limits of Christ's humanity continues to be treated as if they were part of an ongoing seminar" at a University Faculty of Theology (1983:69), which it certainly was not. As late twentieth century scholars we can assume that there always are some material interests at stake underlying our theological debate.

## 2. South African Christologies

Considering the above, it seems obvious that in order to ecumenically understand and to affirm the belief in Christ today in SA, we need to understand the socio-cultural conventions underlying the different theologies that are operative in our diversified society.

In SA we have, generally speaking, five kinds of theology: Roman Catholic, Protestant mainline, Pentecostal and Liberation theology and the theology of the African Indigenous Churches. Rather than attempting a classification, I shall confine myself to the theology/christology of the African Independent Churches.

The AIC that I will concentrate on, is the "Nazarite" sect of Isaiah Shembe who lived from ±1867-1935 and who began his own ministry in 1911 in Natal and today has a following of about 600,000 adherents.

## 3. The Shembe movement

Although the Shembe teaching is a-political, drawing its members from traditional, rural, Zulu's, the movement as such has been described as an agent of social change. Vilakazi explains that the movement arose as a Black reaction against the destructive influence of British colonialism and western civilisation on Zulu culture (1986: 116). The close relationship between Rev J L Dube, the founder of the ANC and Isaiah Shembe, serves to illustrate this point.

Like the teaching of other AIC's, the Shembe faith also has its own millenium intact: a restored Zulu kingdom, sitting peacefully at the feet of Jesus and "the Saints".

In the light of the above, it can be established that the conditions within which the Shembe's (or Nazarites) operate more or less correspond with those under which early Christianity flourished.

## 3. Shembe Christology

A first impression of the Shembe sermons I investigated <sup>2</sup> was that the teachings seemed to lack any christology whatsoever. This, however, can be misleading. The fact is, that no abstract christology is encountered. Nevertheless, on investigation, an implicit christology becomes obvious. This implicit christology revolves around the awareness that Isaiah Shembe (and his successors) are seen as the incarnations or rather manifestations of Christ.

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2. The 23 sermons that I investigated have recently become accessible for research. These were preached from 16 August 1980 to 6 August 1983 by Londa Shembe, grandson of the Isaiah. The sermons, originally in Zulu, were recorded on audio-cassette, transcribed and translated into English by NERMIC at the University of Zululand.

The implicit soteriological significance of the founder-evangelist, Isaiah Shembe, becomes clear when considering the christological language in which his deeds are narrated. The descriptions are, of course, contextualised within the rural Black socio-political and cultural world of Natal.

The account of Shembe's divine birth is not without resemblance to that of Jesus and John the Baptist (sermon 12:3). A childhood narrative tells how God hid him from a boer when stealing peaches (12:4-5).

Like the great figures in the Bible, Shembe also had a calling vision. He dreamt that he was flying in the air and saw three men from the north wearing dresses that were shining more than the sun. When Shembe desired to have such a dress, he was told that one can only get such a dress if he behaved well. "Shembe was disappointed, he cried and preferred dying to going back to his dirty body" (12:6-7). [This report differs somewhat from Dube's as given by Vilakazi (1986: 24).]

Similar to Jesus, Isaiah Shembe was also tempted by opponents: a girl is sent to seduce him, but she breaks down and confesses when he compels her to swear on the Bible that God had sent her (15:3).

Among Shembe's many miracles is the healing of an Indian who refused to go to the doctors, witchdoctors and herbalists (2:5). After healing a white child, Shembe refused the money offered to him (10:2). On another occasion Shembe resurrected a white girl after the white boer bound him with ropes and threatened him (7:2b).

When he was baptising converts the scene is reminiscent of that of John the Baptist baptising people. The story runs as follows (15:1):

White men from Port Shepstone in the company of ministers came and asked him, "Who are you?" He had been baptising at sea that day. The sea was very rough but he went down with his followers. Some people said he can't do it. He will be risking his own life. There were people there at the beach. Shembe then went into the sea. He got right inside the sea. When he was there, he beckoned to his followers to come. When they came he showed the wave to them, the wave covered the person and the process was repeated until they were all finished.

When Shembe had finished these whites and these ministers came to ask him, "Of all the prophets, which one are you?" He replied, "I am not Jesus, I am not Jeremiah, nor any other, but I am Shembe."

The newspapers were already having headlines saying, "Shembe has done a mysterious thing. He baptized people in the sea!" The whites asked him, "Where do you come from because we've been paging the Bible and we've never found Shembe there?" Then Shembe said, "My children, I cannot tell you that. All that I can tell you is that when Moses saw the burning bush, I was there."

Shembe further acquires supernatural dimensions: A dream revealed him to be in heaven (9:6); he is described as divine mediator (12:2). In 14:2b-3 mention is made of his pre-existence. Reminiscent of what Jesus said about himself, people should eat and drink Shembe; "no food is more delicious than Shembe" (7:1). On the day of judgment snakes, stones and little children will testify to his works (15:2).

It is noteworthy that absolute adherence to Shembe is required of the disciples. It seems the case that extra Shembe, nulla salus. In 1:4 we read that one should stick to Shembe like a mother who refused to abandon her dead child. Disciples who persevere in spite of poverty will receive kingship from Shembe (4:1b). The example of Sulile is given, who was martyred for Shembe (2:6-7). The story of Ndlangamandla, a Nazarene Jona, is related in 4:2-3. Deserters are warned that God might reject them (8:1). Shembe requires such absolute obedience (8:1b-2).

The soteriological significance of the preacher is further indicated by many references in the text. Reference is made to the perfect example of Shembe and his total commitment to his mission. In 13:3b Shembe leaves his wives to honour his calling. In 2:2 the people thought Shembe was mad because he obeyed his calling, but he was led by the Spirit.

To a western observer it may seem that Shembe is Christ himself, clothed in local African attire. This sows havoc among western theologians trying to evaluate Shembe theology. Their obvious conclusion is that the person of Isaiah Shembe excludes Christ, that the once-for-all of Christ's redemptive work is nullified and that Shembe theology represents a pre-Christian type of Old Testament faith.

#### 4. Orality theory

A possible key to understanding this completely unorthodox christology, may be found in the theory of orality as has been developed since the 1960's.<sup>3</sup> A most significant observation of Walter Ong is that the medium of communication structures human consciousness (1982a: 78ff). Not only the speech conventions change when a society develops from an oral to a literate society, but the perception of reality itself is modified. It is only in highly literate societies that abstract reasoning and a linear time-conception becomes operative on a wide scale.

It is therefore significant to note that AIC's employ the oral conventions of traditional African society, though their leaders may be highly educated people. The sermons that I investigated clearly show this: their non-linear structure, their open-endedness, a-historical time conception, the type of authority reflected and their agonistic tone, all seem to be unavoidable within

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3. Some of the main sources for orality theory are: Havelock (1963), Gerhardson (1961,1964), esp. Ong (1982a), Vansina (1965, 1985), Boomershine (1987).

the speech conventions an oral religious culture.<sup>4</sup> This may provide us with the key to understand the conflation of Shembe's deeds and those of Jesus Christ.

As it is impossible to enter into all aspects of orality in this article, I will focus on the three features most relevant to the issue:

- \* contextuality
- \* the corporate personality
- \* time-conception or a-historicity

## 5. Contextuality.

The basic insight of oral theory is that spoken words have no abstract or permanent, visual connotation. They disappear as soon as they have been pronounced - *verba volent, scripta manent*.<sup>5</sup> Words are therefore perceived to be events rather than things.<sup>6</sup>

In order to retain the attention of the audience, a speaker in an oral environment has continuously to adapt his material to the life situation of the audience. Due to the direct relationship between speaker and audience, oral texts are "speech acts" in the true sense of the word.<sup>7</sup> Their illocutionary and perlocutionary functions are obvious (which is usually not the case with written texts).<sup>8</sup>

Because oral communication invariably necessitates a direct contextual involvement of the speaker it requires that every narrative must be introduced uniquely into a unique situation (Ong 1982a: 41). Pre-literate people think situationally rather than categorically (Ong 1982a: 52). "The oral mind is uninterested in definitions" (Ong 1982a: 47). The meaning of every word is thus controlled by the real-life situations in which the word is used here and now (Ong 1982a: 47).

From the above it is clear that the identification of Shembe and Christ becomes almost inevitable. It is unavoidable that a hermeneutic process arises in which the real events in the life of Shembe are constantly communicated in

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4. Cf my article on "The oral hermeneutics of Shembe preaching" in Kitshoff, s.a.
  5. Vansina (1965:xi) symbolically opens the preface to his book on oral tradition with these words.
  6. Cf also Dewey, 1989:35, who refers to Havelock, 1963.
  7. Patte (1983:17-8) presupposes that "any idea or argument ultimately aims at causing us to do something, which might only be a very remote goal . . ." With Paul these goals seem most of the time quite obvious (e.g. 2 Cor 8:9 where economic christological metaphors are used in order to encourage financial contributions to the poor). In other cases it may, however, be much more difficult to determine the exact speech act: "If one looks even cursorily at a transcribed record of a conversation, it becomes immediately clear that we do not know how to assign speech acts in a non-arbitrary way" (Levinson 1980:20)
  8. Lyons 1977, 1981:183-8; Ricoeur 1976:27.

terms reminiscent of Jesus. The focus is never on Jesus or God, but on Shembe as exponent of divinity.

## 6. Corporate personality.

In an oral culture people conceive concepts such as solidarity and individuality differently from modern culture. Expressions in an oral culture are empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced (Ong 1982a: 45, Kelber 1983: 150). In the performance of the West African Mwindo Epic, the narrator, e.g., slips into the first person when describing the actions of the hero. So bound together are narrator, audience, and character that, in this epic, the narrator assimilated into his oral performance even the transcribers who were de-oralising it into text (Ong 1982a: 46).

This participatory concept is obvious in the Shembe sermons. Solidarity with Shembe even after his death is presently possible because he is experienced as a supra-personal spirit, communicating with the audience through the preacher. The following two examples serve to illustrate this:

\* "Shembe who we are following is the love we have in our hearts" (1:5).

\* "Shembe our lord is in heaven where our forefathers are. . . . Shembe says, 'Because God loves you, He says I must tell you never to leave this place again'" (5:2).

From the above it is clear why the Nazarites are believed to be in a relationship to Shembe as Paul believed the Christians to be "in Christ". Jesus, Shembe and his followers, are portrayed as a unique spiritual unity, a corporate personality, completely in correspondence with the oral frame of mind.

Let us examine some more examples: The congregation at Ekuphakameni are reminded of their divine election in the story of the Shembe Noah, Ndlangamandla (5:1); Ekuphakameni is said to be heaven itself (5:2a,b); The Nazarenes came from heaven, but it was Shembe that built the house (6:2c); The Nazarenes are gathered at Ekuphakameni because they got permission from the king of Ekuphakameni to be present (12:1); Jesus is with them (3:5). Much emphasis is placed on the uniqueness of the Shembe community: the spirit at Ekuphakameni is unique (1:4/b); there is no other church that can offer a black person such an opportunity to come to God (6:2b).

It follows from the above that in an oral culture, the presence of Christ or the Spirit in the church and in the individual believer would be portrayed much more tangible than in a highly literate culture.<sup>9</sup>

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9. Cf Kelber 1983:145

## 7. Time conception - a-historicity

In studying the sermons it soon becomes apparent that biblical data are treated completely a-historically, with the constant assumption that the narrated events are immediately part of the present, e.g., Abraham set out from Ur of the Chaldeans because he was called by the God of Ekuphakameni, the present religious centre of the Nazarites (2:2a). In the same way the Shembe sanctuary is equated to "the heavenly Jerusalem" of Hebrews 12:18ff. Referring to this phenomenon, Oosthuizen remarks that "Heaven has come down on Zululand".<sup>10</sup>

Orality theory also explains this phenomenon: Time expressions indicate the value which the speaker and the audience attach to what is being said. Temporal expressions have the pragmatic function of compelling the audience to decisive action in the immediate future. The present and not the past, is the locus where God acts decisively. By their proclamation the salvational events are experienced as present events controlling the present and the future.<sup>11</sup> This is also the reason why oral cultures sometimes express the future in the past tense.

Due to the oral conception of time, tradition is maintained by being radically reappropriated in service of the present.<sup>12</sup> Within this frame of mind the historical distance between Christ and Shembe/holy men, is suspended.

## 8 Evaluating the Shembe Christ

What we have here, are merely the broad outlines of Shembe christology. Christ is contextualised in a traditional African context. Thus He is experienced as being manifested here and now as a prophet/holy man. Shembe, his followers and God forms a "corporate personality." These three parties are bound together by the Spirit, which is to them an almost tangible reality.

This brings us to the question whether this is an adequate contextualisation. Does Shembe eventually replace Jesus Christ?<sup>13</sup> To form a balanced opinion

10. It is interesting to note that Vilakazi criticises Oosthuizen sharply for remarking that "Heaven has come down on Zululand" when he evaluates the meaning of the Shembe sanctuary. Vilakazi explains that Ekuphakameni "is a place-name and has little to do with whether the place is on a mountain or on a hill" and that it is "symbolic to the Shembe followers like the City of Jerusalem in Revelation" (1986:111). In the light of oral hermeneutics, neither Oosthuizen's nor Vilakazi's view can be accepted: Ekuphakameni is definitely more than a mere place-name or symbol as Vilakazi intimates; but it would also be wrong to suggest that it completely replaces heaven.
11. Cf Ricoeur for his theory of distanciation (1976:43ff).
12. It was, e.g., found by Koch that 56% of all citations in Paul have been modified to suit the new context, cf Stanley 1990:78.
13. Cf Oosthuizen as reported by Vilakazi 1986:89ff). However, Vilakazi's defence of Shembe, which rests mainly on the accusation that Oosthuizen mistranslated the Shembe hymns, does not satisfy and only confuses the issue. What Vilakazi may have felt, was that Oosthuizen did not understand the oral hermeneutics of Shembe christology.

one must note that the Shembe faith intends to operate within the broad framework of conventional Christianity and the Bible, as is witnessed by many statements in their hymn book (Oosthuizen 1967). It can also be expected that the oral tradition will be constantly enriched by the study of Scripture by its leaders.

What seems to be important, is that before one can evaluate Shembe preaching in terms dogmatic concepts, one has to understand its oral base. To apply a distinctly "Western" critique, or demand an abstract confession of faith would be unreasonable. It must be remembered that theology in the modern sense of the word is a by-product of literate culture and only became possible since the institutionalisation of the church after the fourth century.<sup>14</sup> We must accept that in the oral medium theology has to be done differently than in literate cultures.<sup>15</sup>

To literate people "oral" responses may seem blunt, childish, riddled with superstition, naive etc. It may even seem to be heretical, or definitely semi-christian or even non-christian. From an "oral" point of view, however, it seems that the portrayal of Isaiah Shembe in christological garb, is a natural result necessitated by the medium of communication. If there is a Christ for them He apparently has to become manifest in the life of a holy man or prophet as necessitated by the oral conventions of contextuality, the corporate personality and a-historicity.

Although it is not the aim of this article, the only legitimate method for evaluating the theology of the African Indigenous Churches, would be to compare it with other theologies produced under similar social circumstances. In this respect reference may be made to the monophysite theologies, the Amharic tradition, and even to some theological processes underlying the New Testament itself. In such a study, theological criteria for evaluating the Shembe theology could be: Does the Shembe Christ liberate man from sin by grace? Is He the ultimate statement of God's love, enabling humanity to live in hope, faith and love? At this stage I am not in a position to provide an answer on this issue.

## 9. Conclusions

The Shembe faith displays some distinct features. We can only recapitulate five of these:

1. There is an emphasis on the incarnation and a complete absence of any theology of the cross.

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14. Furnish 1989:246-7 defines theology as "critical reflection on the meaning and truth of the gospel." He also remarks that it was only among the twelfth century scholastics that theology came to be regarded as a comprehensive, systematic presentation of the gospel.

15. Not even the theology of Philo and the rabbinic schools, though comprising of a literary activity, can be seen as "theology" in the modern sense of the word.



1. There is an emphasis on the incarnation and a complete absence of any theology of the cross.
2. The redemptive work of Christ (i.e. the incarnation) is an ongoing process. It is not seen as a "unique, once-for-all, non-rational, historical event which can never be repeated" (Leach 1983: 75).
3. Mediation occur mainly through holy men/prophets (the Shembes) who are led by the Spirit. Although sacrificial ceremonies are not excluded, the mediation is in no way dependent "upon the ritual efficacy of a mediating human priest" (Leach 1983: 67).
4. In contrast to, e.g., fourth century Arianism, the Shembe faith does not see Christ as created being and there is no belief in a hierarchy in the deity either. Shembe, as a holy man/prophet is participating in the deity of God, Christ, and the Spirit.
5. The Shembe millenium functions as a rather vague concept. Nevertheless the Shembe "church" fits the description of first century Christianity as "a collectivity of overlapping millenarian sects with egalitarian ideals, rather than a unitary church" (Leach 1983: 68).

From the above it is clear that Shembe faith cannot be explained merely by means of socio-political theories or "Western" theological criteria. One may be correct in stating that this kind of theology gave voice to the Christ-experience of the lower, deprived, strata of society. What I want to propose, is that these Christians were not only motivated by a narrow political or African agenda, but that they expressed their faith in terms which corresponded to their specific cultural conventions.

The new insights gained in examining the socio-cultural roots and the orality of a traditional African christology, may prove to be valuable in the wider Christological/theological debate in South Africa. A case in point is the Kairos Document.

When first reading the document, I could not but reject its theology, regardless how much empathy I had with its underlying motifs. However, when re-reading it from an oral perspective, it becomes theologically much more comprehensible as an attempt to voice something of the spirituality of the oppressed within the theological conventions of African Christianity. Of course, when compared to the teaching of the AIC's, the Kairos Document, has a very much "western"/literate appearance.

An interesting last question is whether the oral matrix is indispensable to understanding the gospel as such. In other words: do people in a high literacy culture need to develop a post-literate orality (Boomershine 1987: 152) or to return to a pre-literate understanding of the text? (Lindbeck in Ford 1989: 267). If this is so, Christians in the mainline, orthodox churches have much to gain by attempting to understand the theology of the AIC's.

Regarding our present understanding of "oral" theologies, I would like to propose what I call the concept of cognitive entropy. Cognitive entropy implies that there is a time arrow built into our human capacity to understand cultural statements. Because all literate societies developed through an oral phase, and still have a mass of literary material reflecting a residual orality (eg, fairy tales and nursery rhymes), they still have some capacity to understand oral speech conventions. The reverse is not the case; people in a pre-literate, orality culture, do not have any access to the artefacts/consciousness of literate culture.

Even though the boundaries between literate and oral cultures are much more fluid and complex than can be acknowledged by one single theory, it stands to reason that the phenomenon of cognitive entropy places a heavy ecumenical responsibility on the shoulders of literate, mainline, Christians in our country.

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