

“Contested Charisma”. Reflections on the Appearance and Disappearance of Female Visionary Power in a South African Independent Church

Andreas Heuser

RESÜMEE

Andreas Heuser: „Angefochtenes Charisma“. Überlegungen zum Entstehen und Verschwinden der Macht von Seherinnen in einer südafrikanischen unabhängigen Kirche

Wie andere afrikanische unabhängige Kirchen in Südafrika wird die Nazareth Baptist Church meist als eine von Männern dominierte Institution wahrgenommen, obwohl im rituellen Bereich Frauen gelegentlich eine Rolle zugeteilt wird. In der Vergangenheit haben jedoch einzelne Frauen einen erheblichen Einfluss als Prophetinnen oder „Engel“ gehabt, die behaupteten, Visionen vom verstorbenen Gründer der Kirche erhalten zu haben. Diese in Vergessenheit geratene Frauen ergriffen nicht nur Partei in den Machtkämpfen der männlichen Hierarchie der Kirche, sondern förderten bestimmte religiöse Ideen, vor allem die Forderung nach ritueller Reinheit.

In 1981 the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), in South Africa widely known after its founding prophet, Isaiah Shembe (c. 1870 – 1935), as the Shembe Church, celebrated its 70th anniversary. The festivities were overshadowed by a severe succession conflict. Following the death of Johannes Galilee Shembe, who had been Bishop for four decades (1935–1976), church cohesion eroded, escalating into a violent confrontation. As a result, the NBC split into two branches, which consider one another heretics to this day.¹

1 On the general history of the NBC, see G.C. Oosthuizen, *The Theology of a South African Messiah*, Leiden/Köln 1967; A. Vilakazi / B. Mthethwa / M. Mpanza, *Shembe. The Revitalization of African Society*, Johannesburg 1986; A. Heuser, *Shembe, Gandhi und die Soldaten Gottes. Wurzeln der Gewaltfreiheit in Südafrika*, Münster/New York 2003. The most informative accounts of the split in 1976 are H.-J. Becken, *Ekuphakameni Revisited*, in: *Journal of Religion in Africa* 9 (1978), H. 3, pp. 16–172, and G.C. Oosthuizen, *Succession Conflict Within the Church of the*

The majority of members congregated around Isaiah's second son, Amos Khula Shembe (1976–1995), whereas the minority section supported the claims for leadership of a son of J.G. Shembe, Londa Shembe (1976–1989).² During the jubilee activities, the majority branch leader, Amos K. Shembe, was presented with a novel and still uncompleted praise-song. Praise-songs (*izibongo*) usually aim at evoking a sense of loyalty towards the person mentioned. Being performed from time to time during public events, they address values and convictions this person stands for. As such *izibongo* have an impact on the social identity of a group, as well as narrating collective memory. The composition of this praise-song for A.K. Shembe is telling. It alludes straight away to the most painful phase in NBC history:

Ithole lakithi eKuphakameni,

Our calf at Ekuphakameni,

Umphekeleli ophikelele

Amadoda amaphekula,

Abesebize izinyange eKuphakameni,

Umphekeleli ophikelele

Abafazi bamaphekula

Sebephendukezele izidwaba

Bazibhekisa emuva,

Ngoba bethi balokotha

Inyanga yezulu,

Kanti bayazilokotha.

The Natal kingfisher who persists

against the misled men

*who had already called diviners to Eku-
phakameni*

The Natal kingfisher who persists

against the misled women

*who had already turned their leather kilts
inside out*

And made them look backwards

because they thought to threaten

the moon,

they brought evil upon themselves.³

These few lines memorialise the years of turmoil and uncertainty in leadership, accusing a coalition of “misled men and women” of deviating from the canonised path of church tradition. The praise-song recalls grave heresies that were uttered within the sacred ground of *Ekuphakameni* (the “Elevated Place”), when “diviners” were called to prophesy within the church headquarters, established in 1910 at Inanda, outside Durban. They make up a solid faction with some powerful female opponents of A.K. Shembe, who is portrayed with his praise-name, “the Moon”⁴. Considering the viewpoint of those “misled women” of the church, it is obviously characterised by a combination of inversive ritual praxis and of ideological arguments. They not only rearrange the prescribed ritual garb for (married)

Nazarites (Institute for Social and Economic Research), University of Durban-Westville 1981.

2 The further developments in this branch of the NBC are outside the scope of this article. Since Londa's death in 1989 this section remained without a formal leadership. Only in 1998 Vukile Shembe (b. 1980) was, in accordance with his father's last will, ordained as the new church leader (for a theological profile of this branch, cf. A. Heuser, 'He Dances like Isaiah Shembe!' – Ritual Aesthetics as a Marker of Church Difference, in: *Studies in World Christianity* 14 (2008) (forthcoming).

3 Cf. L. Lashicilelwa/T.H. Mnyandu (eds.), *Ushembe Nebanda LaseKuphakameni* 1981 (typescript), p. 33 (translated from Zulu by H.-J. Becken in cooperation with A.H.).

4 For the origin of this praise-name, see below, the section on Henry Shembe.

women but connect this subversion with a certain interpretation of history. As we shall see, these female voices intended to correct the current outlook of the NBC by offering a critical interpretation of the genuine vision of the founder, Isaiah Shembe.

Of course, A.K. Shembe's praise-song meticulously avoids disclosing the names of his adversaries or even providing more detailed information about the nature of their aberrations. However, it says enough to challenge a common view concerning the impact of women on church life. Churches in South Africa during and since the Apartheid era are commonly perceived as male-dominated. Consequently, structures, services and theologies appear mainly shaped by male perceptions and aspirations irrespective of the specific type of church. Research in the area of African Independent Churches (AIC), to which the NBC belongs, advocates basically the same view of church life. Drawing from her fieldwork on AICs, the US-American anthropologist Benetta Jules-Rosette has tried to correct this perception. She has shown that women continue to exercise various forms and degrees of leadership, though firmly restricted to the female section of their church. In order to define female praxis in those circumscribed spaces, she coined the notion of "ceremonial leadership". Ceremonial leadership is understood as a control of authority limited in time and/or in action. With regard to the difference between formally recognised authority – the positioning of women in church hierarchies – and informal participation, Jules-Rosette defines the frame of female power as being entirely restricted to ritual and worship. In her conclusion, "ceremonial leadership is the limited exercise of power in practical decision-making and ritual settings."⁵

By contrast, the above mentioned praise-song makes mention of female voices in the NBC which influenced the overall policy of their church. Although they remain anonymous, their actions surfaced in moments of existential crises in church history to claim authority in a male-dominated hierarchy. The following case-study seeks to shed some light on female visionary power and its limits, not by adopting a functional approach to singular ritual actions but by historicising events. Such an historical approach illuminates a certain political economy of female prophecy that comes to light during initial phases in leadership, or put otherwise, during the more sensitive passages of succession from one leader to another. In order to interpret female prophetic activity in the NBC we can draw on a considerable collection of oral narratives, arranged in the 1980s and published in the 1990s.⁶ Material from public archives and from private collections supplements this official oral history of the NBC. A critical comparison of these sources provides some insight into the church policy of remembrance. It shows that the public appearance of "misled women" is by no means restricted to the period of conflict in the 1970s mentioned above. Prophetesses, as they are otherwise and in more positive terms known in

5 Cf. B. Jules-Rosette, *Women as ceremonial leaders in an African church: The Apostles of John Maranke*, in: B. Jules-Rosette (ed.), *The New Religions*, pp. 127-144, Norwood 1979, p.130.

6 Cf. I. Hexham, *The Scriptures of the amaNazaretha of EkuphaKameni*, Calgary 1994; I. Hexham/G.C. Oosthuizen (eds.), *The Story of Isaiah Shembe, I-III*, Lewiston 1996; 1999; 2001. The NBC collection is the only published documentation of church memories in the broad spectre of AICs so far. The whole set has been translated by H.-J. Becken.

the NBC, may be traced back even to the time when the foundations of this church were laid out at the beginning of the century. Finally, a short survey of the most recent succession conflict that flared up in the mid-1990s demonstrates a drastic change in prophetic outlook. More significantly, it reveals the removal of visionary female power from church memory. Today, for the first time in NBC history, female prophecy no longer plays any role on the political stage of the church.

Mad Prophetesses, Angels and Demons

The beginning of Isaiah Shembe's ministry in Natal remains a mystery not because of any lack of historical information, but rather because it is part of a discourse on religious madness. When Isaiah Shembe, who was brought up in the Harrismith district, settled in Natal, some women unknown by name played a role as his visionary advisors. J.G. Shembe on one occasion provided useful details about the early period in church history in a sermon in which he told the story of a Xhosa woman known as the “woman from the Cape”. According to J.G. Shembe, she announced Isaiah as a prophet to the people in Natal. The historical context was the aftermath of the 1906 Bambatha rebellion, a period characterised by the experience of forced migration, a disruptive process that had already begun with the South African War (1899–1901):

Even the woman from the Cape prophesied about him. She rode a bicycle up to UBombo. She was talking, saying ‘There is a person who is coming; this person is a fire; he will burn all bad things here on earth. He is a person who did not attend school, he learnt from Heaven.’ People said that that woman was mad.⁷

The early 20th century milieu of prophetic movements of which Shembe himself was part was full of such outstanding female characters. NBC oral history has collected the fate of some other women who influenced Shembe in his early years as a church founder. Like the ominous “woman from the Cape” they are accepted as John the Baptist figures pointing at Isaiah Shembe as the long-awaited messianic person. Interestingly enough, they were all portrayed as wandering prophetesses, roaming about from South (the Cape) to North (UBombo). Equipped with such a high degree of mobility and self-confidence they became the role-models for Shembe's own prophetic task. Others became his teachers of religious difference. An anonymous “woman from the North”⁸ made him aware of the biblical issue of healing by faith. The topos of healing formed an essential element in the growth of this prophetic movement of prophetesses and prophets in the first two decades of the 20th century. At the same time it was used to engage in a distancing discourse on madness. The context in which the prophetic movement acted was characterised by the experience of mass possession with phenomena of ecstasy and mass hyste-

7 J.G. Shembe, Sermon on a Sabbath, Ekuphakameni (undated, but most probably from the mid 1960s).

8 This woman separated from a mission church to instruct other people about faith healing, cf. Heuser, Shembe (footnote 1), p. 279.

ria.⁹ The experience of spirit possession was clearly gendered. It affected predominantly female adults, and many of those who counteracted possession were female healers, too. Outside observers perceived their healing performance as mad itself, or at least as quite strange. Because of his closeness to the “woman from the North”, his teacher in healing techniques, the notion of madness was projected on Shembe, too. Oral history mentions several instances where Shembe was announced by more sceptic observers as the “mad-man” coming to solve the country’s problems.¹⁰

The inside discourse, of course, was different. The female prophetic circle around Shembe came to be known as the “angels” of the church. As later episodes in church history show, their function was protection. They guaranteed continuity, and their impact on church life was of a stabilising nature. Through the action of female “angels” the first severe conflict over succession in the NBC could be solved. When J.G. Shembe inherited his father’s responsibility to guide the NBC, a large section of the church constituency considered him an academic with no experience in church matters. He relied heavily on his angelic advisors to handle the church affairs and to acquire knowledge of the doctrinal and ritual life of the NBC.¹¹ They legitimised their actions and their advice by claiming to have had visions of the late Isaiah Shembe. This answer was given to Bengt Sundkler, when he first encountered NBC followers to collect his basic material for his pioneering research on AICs in South Africa. In 1941 he found some church hymns that, as commented by his interview partners, were composed by Isaiah Shembe “after his death”. Those hymns were then received by the “angels” through visionary experience. The hymns were included in early editions of the NBC hymnbook but later removed from it.¹² Undefined as they are in those statements, the women might be identified with the “angels” of the church because they acted as Isaiah’s media through visionary experience and audition. Their lyrics describe excursions to heavenly places to meet with the risen founder-prophet. By this means they enhance the status of Isaiah Shembe who mediates his directions from an outerworld to further edify the church through the “angels”. Another aspect of the hymns was their obvious political emphasis that echoed for many years in the church. As Absalom Vilakazi still sensed in the early 1950s, this corpus of hymns “was obviously propagandist in intent” and filled with “political slogans”.¹³

9 The phenomenon in question was the amandiki-possession between 1894 and 1914, cf. J. Parle, *Witchcraft or Madness? The Amandiki of Zululand, 1894–1914*, in: *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (2003), H.1, pp. 105–132.

10 See for instance Hexham/ Oosthuizen (eds.), *Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), p. 241.

11 J.G. Shembe confessed in a sermon (17 August 1974) that “I did not know the teachings of my father, for I was not staying with him.” He held a higher degree from Fort Hare, the first University for black students in Southern Africa and was a teacher at the renowned Adam’s College in Amanzimtoti when he was selected as the new leader of the NBC in 1935.

12 Cf. B. Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, London 1961 (2nd edition), p. 284; K. Schlosser, *Eingeborenkirchen in Süd- und Südwestafrika*, Kiel 1958, p. 276; G.C. Oosthuizen, *Theology of a South African Messiah* (footnote 1), p. 191.

13 A. Vilakazi, *Isondo LamaNazareth: The Church of the Nazarites. A Study of the Pattern of Organization and Teachings of a Separatist Church among the Zulus of Natal, South Africa* (unpublished M.A. thesis, Kennedy School of Missions), Hartford 1954, p. 83.

According to Amos K. Shembe, the activity of these guiding “angels” for J.G. Shembe emerged in the period 1935 to 1938.¹⁴ This period was marked by a grave incident. In March 1939, an opponent to J.G. Shembe by the name of Mdolomba (Nkabinde) was stoned to death by a multitude of several hundred female NBC followers. The “angels”, one may assume, played their part in the turmoils. Newspapers reported a rumour that had circulated in *Ekuphakameni*: Isaiah Shembe had been resurrected and had conversed with certain female followers to denounce some persons, who were to be chased out from the premises of the church. Mdolomba was one of those ejected persons, but he returned and threatened to harm J.G. Shembe. He was thrown out by female members who declared him “Satan” and then stoned him to death.¹⁵ Maybe this criminal offence explains why even in early oral accounts the female “angels” remained nameless. Even the proceedings of the court case could never disclose the identity of single “angels”. All the accused women pleaded guilty!¹⁶ The violence they used to settle the dissent of Mdolomba points to the most dangerous situation of leadership conflict imaginable. Decades later J.G. Shembe still employs this incident to teach strict church discipline. As elsewhere, the 1960s were a decade of generational change and upheaval in the NBC. Young followers wanted to redirect the lifestyle and the moral standards of the church. In a church service that dealt with leadership issues, Shembe reprimanded them in a prayer:

*Lord, we place before you these boys and girls who are naughty in this home of yours... We pray that their hearts change so that they cease from being uncontrolled, but that they be controlled by the priests, the preachers, and the women advisors. Let them learn to obey when they are reproved. This demon of Mdolomba which has entered them must come out.*¹⁷

In the long run the protective function of the “angels” had turned into the demonisation of opposition. However, the prophetic activity of the “angels” who remained anonymous is discernible: the “angels” dealt with the control of protest. They did not act impartially but took sides in leadership issues against J.G. Shembe’s enemies in the holy city of *Ekuphakameni*. In order to secure the social cohesion of the church, they interfered with a high degree of authority in its religious life. Finally, they legitimised their church-related political options by their intimate spiritual relationship with the founder-prophet, Isaiah Shembe. They were regarded as his media, they “saw” him in heaven. They transmitted his messages to his people on earth. This profile of female prophecy is recurrent in NBC history. Yet, given the partiality of visionary prophecy, it may turn against a current leader. Or, put differently, some of the “angels” may transform into “misled women”.

14 Interview by Hexham/ Poewe with A.K. Shembe on 14 July, 1987 in Ebuhleni (private collection Heuser).

15 Reports in “The Natal Mercury” (21 March 1939; 4 April 1939) and in “The Cape Argus” (4 April 1939). Mdolomba was the son of another prophet, Sandile Nkabinde, who had merged his own church with the NBC. The prophecy of Nkabinde and the exceptional process of merging two AICs is described in Heuser, Shembe (footnote 1), pp. 110-114.

16 Five hundred of the women had to face a court trial with eleven sentenced to six months’ imprisonment, and 447 women sentenced to three months’ imprisonment suspended for three years.

17 J.G. Shembe, Sermon on 31 July 1965.

Charismatic Prophecy and Political Vision

The next critical period in NBC history came with the succession conflict after the death of J.G. Shembe in 1976 mentioned above. Already during the last years of his leadership as well as afterwards two prophetesses with characteristic theological profiles raised their voices in an attempt to direct church policy. The first was Mama Dainah Zama, who forms part of the official version of NBC's oral history. The second, Ma Mpungose, started her own splinter-group after she had been excommunicated. All we know about the two protagonists is that they were presumably of similar age, operated at the same period of time over a period of several decades, and, finally, represented opposing parties in the aforementioned succession conflict.

Accounts of oral history reveal that Mama Dainah Zama acted as a prophetess from her home, an outlying NBC mission station located in the southern Harding district of KwaZulu-Natal. The NBC had gained a high reputation by distinguished features of ritual performance, such as healing by faith. Additionally, it conducts a yearly pilgrimage in January to a holy mountain, which is unique in the whole of Southern Africa, and it holds regular dance festivals with a climax in *Ekuphakameni* in July. Furthermore the emerging church succeeded in covering the whole of Natal and Zululand with a dense net of mission outstations and regional centres such as Mama Dainah Zama's home. From time to time, she was directed by divine call to the distant headquarters of the NBC, *Ekuphakameni*. With the exclamation "I am a messenger of *Mvelinqangi [God]*"¹⁸ she thus infiltrated the central sacred space close to Durban from the regional periphery of the church. Mama Dainah Zama's prophetic voice did not constantly interrupt the community life in *Ekuphakameni*, but occurred in sequences during several decades when she was filled with visionary experiences. Her claims to act as a divine messenger dated back at least to the early 1960s. According to oral tradition, she wanted to influence the development of the NBC under the leadership of J.G. Shembe by pointing to the original vision of the founder-prophet, Isaiah Shembe. In this regard her prophecy included a broad range of topics. Not only did she refer to liturgical settings or the spiritual life of the church, but also to its social ethos and its political diaconia. So it seems that Mama Dainah Zama was pre-occupied with the policy of buying land for the use of "widows and orphans", i. e. for church members and deprived people suffering from social and economic upheavals.

From the mid-1960s Mama Dainah Zama's prophecy was infused with clear political intentions. Her message combined the imagination of a collective Zulu identity with the establishment of a Zulu National Church. She clearly renewed an option dating from the late 1920s and early 1930s, when Isaiah Shembe had been presented in African discourse as the able protagonist of a future Zulu National Church. This project of a Zulu National Church had aimed to restore the political legitimacy of the Zulu royal house and formed

18 Hexham/Oosthuizen (eds.), *Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), p. 1.

part of the resurgence of Zulu nationalism. Ideologically the vision of a Zulu National Church was carried on the waves of a politicised ethnicity. The African intelligentsia had constructed a glorified Zulu past with a very popular imagery of the Zulu as an exceptional warrior nation. Those years, when Isaiah Shembe was considered the protagonist of a Zulu National Church, had marked the zenith of his public recognition as a religio-political leader. It had ended nevertheless with a long-term interruption of ties between the NBC and the Zulu royal house.¹⁹

Now, in the 1960s Mama Dainah Zama revitalised the idea of a Zulu National Church. In 1966 the Zulu monarchy became fully restored with King Zwelithini's enthronement. Nevertheless, the political agenda of the day did not feature prominently in the history of politicised ethnicity. The conception of Zuluness at that time did not bear the ideological urgency as it had borne a generation before or was to bear in the 1970s with the formation of the (second) *Inkatha* movement; rather, it existed “in a much looser form” and in a “broadly agreed-upon” collective identity.²⁰ In this stage of Zulu ethnicity Mama Dainah Zama offered a whole political ideology. She merged this low-key Zulu identity with the newly installed monarchy and linked it again with the idea of a Zulu National Church that she saw embodied in the NBC. In the same year Mama Dainah Zama instructed J.G. Shembe in a vision to see the Zulu king and direct his political agenda. He should

“go there and pour out to the Zulu nation and to their king the secrets that have been revealed to him ..., because this throne belongs to me (i.e. to God).” She insisted that *“this throne ought to be erected by the prayer of the lord of Ekuphakameni. ... Should this not be done in this way, there will be no authority.”*²¹

Her vision even went beyond the boundaries of her church. Mama Dainah Zama approached the traditional political authorities (*amakhosi*). Yet her narrative of a future

19 The role of religion in the shaping of a Zulu ethnicity (see P. La Hausse, *Restless Identities. Signatures of Nationalism, Zulu Ethnicity and History in the Lives of Petros Lamula (c. 1881–1948) and Lymon Maling (1889–1936)*, Pietermaritzburg 2000, pp. 1–32 for an excellent research overview) has not really been a focus in social history so far. The discourse around a Zulu National Church can be traced in contemporary Zulu sources and is documented in length in A. Heuser, *Ethnizität und die Entdeckung afrikanischer Religion: Die Debatte um eine Zulu-Nationalkirche zwischen Segregation und kirchlichem Independismus*, in: U. van der Heyden/ H. Stoecker (eds.), *Mission und Macht im Wandel politischer Orientierungen. Europäische Missionsgesellschaften in politischen Spannungsfeldern in Afrika und Asien zwischen 1800 und 1945* (Missionsgeschichtliches Archiv Bd. 10), Stuttgart 2005, pp. 345–372. Shembe was linked to the royal family through the marriage of his daughter to Solomon ka Dinuzulu. Already before the death of Solomon (1933) he criticised his lifestyle and subsequently his influence on the royal politics weakened. The relationship between church and royal house started to slowly normalise again only from the late 1950s. On the roots of Zulu ethnic consciousness see also S. Marks, *Patriotism, Patriarchy and Purity: Natal and the Politics of Zulu Ethnic Consciousness*, in: L. Vail (ed.), *The Creation of Tribalism in Southern Africa*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/Oxford 1989, pp. 215–240.

20 G. Maré, *Brothers Born of Warrior Blood. Politics and Ethnicity in South Africa*, Johannesburg 1992, p. 56 with reference to the ethnic thinking mingled in the ANC and in the beginnings of M. Buthelezi's second Inkatha movement (see G. Maré/ G. Hamilton, *An Appetite for Power. Buthelezi's Inkatha and the Politics of 'Loyal Resistance'*, Johannesburg 1987). The ideological links between Shembe and the first Inkatha movement in the 1920s are detailed in Heuser, Shembe (footnote 1), Chapter 7.

21 Hexham/Oosthuizen (eds.), *Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), pp. 1–2.

political architecture did not encompass this specific invention of a Zulu nationalism that imagined a heroic and golden past. Referring to African history her prophecy accused the whole genealogy of the Zulu monarchy of being responsible for “wars and blood shedding”, or for a history of failure that did not earn political “authority” *per se*. In straight terms she told her audience that “This kingdom ... will not be a restoration of the old Zulu kingdom. Now begins a new and different kingdom” – a kingdom under the auspices of the NBC.²²

According to Mama Dainah Zama, her idea of a Zulu nation restored under the religious and moral codes of the NBC was not well received. First and foremost she accused J.G. Shembe of not listening to her divine inspiration. “All these words were sent to the Sun (i.e. the praise name for J.G. Shembe, see below); but he did not reply whether he accepted them or not.” Mama Dainah Zama directed the revival of the idea of a Zulu National Church, as already mentioned, to fit the political ambitions of Isaiah Shembe. In her own analysis the carelessness of the current leader threatened Isaiah’s vision of the church. As a consequence, she foresaw that the Zulu memory of war that she had recalled in her vision would affect even the sacred ground of *Ekuphakameni*. Pointing at J.G. Shembe’s seemingly ignorant attitude, she anticipated the conflict that occurred a decade later: “Should this nation not enter the kingdom of God, then the drops of pain and blood will be spread on all the children of men there at *Ekuphakameni*.”²³

Claiming the *kairos* of judgment, she announced: “Now, the trumpet shall sound, because the days have come that this nation will be liberated under the law of God.”²⁴ And then she explained the real motives nourishing her idea of a National Church: this unified church, “which is different to the church of the Whites”, would help “to liberate us from the hands of the Whites”.²⁵

Clearly, at a time when Apartheid was flourishing, people’s desire for a different political system lent Mama Dainah Zama’s prophecy an apocalyptic urgency. Her call to become independent “from the hands of the Whites” was rooted in the very real context of forced removals. In the mid-1960s the spatial autonomy of the NBC was threatened by Apartheid land policy. The NBC had already experienced the loss of certain mission stations in the countryside by forced removals. Now, with the possible eviction of *Ekuphakameni* rumoured everywhere in the church, J.G. Shembe addressed this fear extensively in sermons like the following, preached at the end of the well-attended July festival in 1965:

As you are here at Ekuphakameni, you are faced with a bad period. ... There are those who suspect that this place will be taken from you. There are those who want to deprive us of this place, he commented on the dangerous situation of loosing the sacred place that formed the backbone of church identity. He continued: Let me ask this question, if this home of Ekuphakameni is destroyed, what can you do, what type of people can you

22 Hexham/ Oosthuizen (eds.), *Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), pp. 2; 4.

23 Ibid., p. 2.

24 Ibid, p. 4.

25 Ibid., p. 3.

*be? ... This is not the type of home which can be removed; it is not the type of home which can be moved from one place to another through the choice of man. It is not a home like that. This home came from Heaven, and was placed here at Ekuphakameni. It was not built on earth; it was built in Heaven, and was then brought to earth. ... If it is removed here from Ekuphakameni, it will be the end of it. It cannot exist again.*²⁶

J.G. Shembe's political analysis is of a rather passive nature. His language applies defensive vocabulary; it does not strive for a solution of the problem. Mama Dainah Zama was of a more outspoken and more active nature. She deplored the leader's inactivity in her prophecies:

*(J.G. Shembe) wastes time by doing things that could be done tomorrow. Would it not have been befitting for him ... that he should rise respectfully and stand on his feet?*²⁷

What her own message stood for was the land policy and the social ethos Isaiah Shembe had once proclaimed. As a constituent of the National Church she stressed economic autonomy by basic educational self-improvement. She reminded everybody that the founder bought land for his followers to avoid migrant labour and to protect their independency from the centres of the established market economy. Now, taken from the oral record, Mama Dainah Zama's insight was that J.G. Shembe no longer adhered to the NBC's memory of former political pretensions. By contrast, she opposed the acting church leader with harsh and frank words. In open disagreement with his leadership she raised her voice against him: "Where are all these things today?"²⁸

With regard to the distancing undertones over against J.G. Shembe, it might seem surprising that Mama Dainah Zama was incorporated into the NBC's oral history. First of all, Mama Dainah Zama's religious and political prophecy is reminiscent of the era of the church founder himself, which many church members could still remember. To be more precise: her prophetic ambitions represent an affirmative and orthodox restoration of the theology of Isaiah Shembe as it was proclaimed during the time of the collection of these layers of oral tradition. And it was J.G. Shembe himself who had constantly reminded his followers to collect the early traditions concerning Isaiah Shembe and his time. His own approach to church history was not at all a selective one: "You must write even the stories that Shembe told as he was sitting", he told his audience during the July festival in 1971. "Even the way of doing things in his journeys. You write everything you saw him doing."²⁹ The retrospective visions of someone like Mama Dainah Zama imagined Isaiah's era in a most authoritative manner.

Secondly, Mama Dainah Zama never gave up prophesying about the religio-political need to establish a Zulu National Church. She still proclaimed it in the 1970s, when her ideas became *en vogue* with the formation of a Zuluised political movement. The second

26 J.G. Shembe, Sermon on 17 July 1965, Ekuphakameni.

27 Hexham/ Oosthuizen (eds.), *Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), p. 3.

28 Ibid., p. 4.

29 J.G. Shembe, Sermon on 24 July 1971, Ekuphakameni.

Inkatha was led by Mangosuthu Buthelezi, whose mother had been an early follower of Isaiah Shembe. In the 1970s the NBC earned a reputation for hosting many *Inkatha* members, amongst them a good number of traditional authorities (*amakhosi* and *indunas*). Buthelezi himself used to contact the church leaders in *Ekuphakameni* on a regular basis.³⁰ If something like a Zulu National Church had come into being, then the NBC would have been a plausible choice.

Thirdly, the integration of Mama Dainah Zama's prophecy into the oral church history was due to the succession conflict in the NBC in the late 1970s. Mama Dainah Zama was preoccupied with the destiny of the schism and supported the actual policy of reuniting the church. She took a strong prophetic point of view that legitimised the leadership of Amos K. Shembe. She accused Londa Shembe of being the root cause "for the blood and the tears of people" as a result from the schism. In analogy to her interpretation of Zulu history she spoke of a recent history of "war" in the NBC and sent out warning messages towards the minority branch of Londa Shembe: "There is no second church in this movement." She wanted them to come back and offered a way to reconcile the two factions by means of ritual cleansing. If the Londa branch did not agree to this cleansing ritual, which would include a second baptism and certain offerings, they should be excommunicated. She reminded them: "We wear the white gown, but not the gown of blood."³¹

To strengthen her viewpoint, she had abandoned her critical stance towards Londa Shembe's late father, J.G. Shembe, and made him prominent as the last representative of a common church body. Therefore, we find traces of her prophetic identity only in the oral tradition of the main (A.K. Shembe) branch of the NBC and not in the Londa section. Yet even in this collection of NBC oral history the irritation about Mama Dainah Zama's charismatic weight persists. The editors describe her prophecy "to illustrate the socio-religious background of life and thought in this movement".³² A renowned prophetess who had criticised hierarchy and church policy over decades has been confined to a mere progenomenon of NBC church history.

Rebirth by Mimesis and Symbolic Inversion

The loss of visionary female experience as an integral part of church memory is even more evident in the case of Ma Mpungose. The prophetess has been erased from the official memory of the NBC and the shape of her theological profile is more rudimentary.³³

30 For a detailed account of the connection between the second *Inkatha* and the NBC in the 1990s, see B. Svenningsen, *Sønner av Shaka – Barn av Shembe. Identitet og Inkatha i Ekuphakameni* (unpublished M.A. thesis, History Department, Norwegian University for Technology and Science) Trondheim 1997. U. Engel, *Ethnische Konflikte und politischer Neubeginn in Südafrika*, in: *Africa Spectrum* 32 (1997), pp. 25-47 provides a helpful comparative political analysis of Zulu and Afrikaander nationalism in the new South Africa.

31 Hexham/ Oosthuizen (eds.), *Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), pp. 5-6.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

33 The main sources on Ma Mpungose are the Oosthuizen collections and the NERMIC Archive (formerly University of Zululand). Especially the Oosthuizen file on "Ma Mpungose" contains several booklets and fragments.

It seems that she revived the tradition of the above mentioned “angels”, though her motivations to act as a prophetess remain obscure. Nonetheless, the available sources allow us to depict a public figure who wanted to redirect the policy of her church. In contrast to Mama Dainah Zama, Ma Mpungose did not primarily believe in the plausibility of ‘ideo-logical’ arguments. In order to interfere with the orientation of the NBC she first of all saw a need to delegitimise the male hierarchy, and secondly she made use of another type of argument, the “argument of images” and of symbolic inversion.³⁴

Since she became a member of the NBC in the early 1960s, Ma Mpungose was a resident of *Ekuphakameni*. There, people consulted her at home and respected her advice: For many she showed prophetic qualities.³⁵ Compared to Mama Dainah Zama, Ma Mpungose did not speak as a messenger of God but rather acted as Isaiah Shembe’s medium. She introduced her dictum with words that pointed to him as the source of her authority, such as: “Babankulu (Great Father) says”, or: “The iNkosi (the Lord) said”. And then her visions would recall all the deviations from the original design of the church in the course of its actual history. To abandon this history of decline and to join the path paved by the founder, her enactment of Isaiah Shembe’s visions bore a rather legalistic dimension. In “Babankulu’s” name she threatened with sanctions – including excommunication – all those who would not adhere to his/her original law.

To gain support Ma Mpungose sought to stabilise the social cohesion of the NBC. Either she urged the church to harmonise its rituals, ranging from wedding customs to the ordination of pastors, or she directly criticised the neglect of a whole range of specific religious laws covering the whole set of liturgical necessities in the NBC. She was especially preoccupied with the “garments of Heaven”, examining the correct ritual dress of all the age-groups and gender sections in the NBC. Her zeal to cleanse the church from deviations took on an anti-Western rhetoric. In her view the “garments of Heaven” functioned as the religious criteria of difference vis-à-vis the mainline churches: “This is not the American Board Mission. Wearing trousers will shut the Doors of Heaven to you.”³⁶

The hidden memory of Ma Mpungose in the NBC brings to the surface again a prophetic appearance that focuses more on ceremonial aspects of religious life than on politically inspired aspirations as in the case of Mama Dainah Zama. Ma Mpungose’s prophetic theology aims at preserving the genuine identity of the NBC in the religious landscape, pleading for ritual purity and the need for cleansing. She suggested ritual innovations in a rigid form underpinned by the apocalyptic vision of the Last Day, the Day of God’s Judgement.

34 J. Fernandez, African Religious Movements, in: Annual Review of Anthropology 7 (1978), pp. 195-234 (here: pp. 228-229) describes as the central modus of religious worldview in African religious movements in general the specific “argument of images”, including ritual performance, song and dance, liturgical settings or a vast variety of colour symbolisms. R. Werbner, Ritual Passage, Sacred Journey. The Form, Process and Organization of Religious Movement, Washington 1989, pp. 299-323 applies the notion of the “argument of images” to offer a typology of AICs in Zimbabwe.

35 Information provided by the veteran NBC women’s leader Ma Mthembu, Phoenix/Inanda, January 2003.

36 Oosthuizen file: Ma Mpungose: 39-40.

Furthermore, by her conviction of being chosen to reinforce the will of Isaiah Shembe, Ma Mpungose took a step that Mama Dainah Zama never dared to take. When she endeavoured to identify heretics she did not shy away from addressing the male-dominated church hierarchy. Endowed with an unparalleled self-certainty, Ma Mpungose accused the senior ministers of breaking the laws of *Ekuphakameni*. “Angels walk on this yard. Yet you frighten them”, disobeying the sacred ground. “What will you say for yourself on the Last Day?”³⁷

From such fragments of her message it becomes evident that Ma Mpungose entered the vague memory of church members as the prophetess who announced the day of doom.³⁸ Concerning church policy, Ma Mpungose obviously confronted even the current leader, J.G. Shembe, and the way he organised the expansion of the NBC. In the course of time he had given more weight to certain sub-centers of the church. His eagerness to regionalise the church had caused some turmoil in the NBC, so that, according to some oral sources, even the unity of the NBC was endangered. In order to strengthen ties with the Zulu royal house, promoters of the regional Zululand church headquarter, *iLinda* (“the Waiting”), intended to develop it as the sacred place of the NBC. Oral history even states that this faction intended to “bring the sacred bones” (i.e. Isaiah Shembe’s grave) from *Ekuphakameni* to *Linda*: “In the course of time, the Zulu people will also have their mountain (i. e. the equivalent to the Nhlankazi mountain) here.”³⁹ Indeed, these layers of the NBC oral history give preference to the Zululand center and strive to take over functional aspects of *Ekuphakameni*. In a way, what Richard Werbner calls an organisational dispute between regionalism and a “central place competition” had started within the NBC.⁴⁰

In this situation of open controversy about the future identity of the church, Ma Mpungose took a viewpoint of her own. Contrary to the Zululand faction⁴¹, and contrary also to the establishment of several regional headquarters favoured by J.G. Shembe, she opted for the continuation of a policy of centralisation at the original sacred place, *Ekuphakameni*. Her prophetic action condensed in the time just before the death of J.G. Shembe in 1976. Eventually, during the years of contested succession, Ma Mpungose even had her own ambitions to lead the church. She now summoned all the prophetic capital that she had amassed during the last two decades and opposed very actively the majority faction in the church. She supported the leadership ambitions of Londa Shembe, who authorised her prophetic gifts and consulted her in the process of open conflict. Thus for the first time Ma Mpungose was granted a significant reputation as a prophetess even in

37 Oosthuizen-file: Ma Mpungose: 36.

38 NBC member Bongani Mthembu summarises the religious biography of Ma Mpungose as the “prophet of doom” (letter to A.H., 27 January 2003).

39 Hexham/ Oosthuizen (eds.), *The Story of Isaiah Shembe* (footnote 6), pp. 278-279.

40 Werbner, *Ritual Passage* (footnote 34), pp. 316-319 describes a “central place competition” in his case-studies of AICs in Zimbabwe.

41 There is no indication that Mama Dainah Zama, originating from southern KwaZulu-Natal, was involved with it, though there is an ideological link.

policy matters by a male-oriented hierarchy she had challenged all her life with an apocalyptic vigour. But Ma Mpungose realised that their strategy to succeed in the faction fight had failed and that Londa's support among the NBC remained rather weak. Her influence on Londa declined, and Ma Mpungose eventually decided to leave the church – whether of her own free will or not remains unclear.⁴² Surrounded by a group of several hundred people who trusted in her leadership qualities she started her own church in the late 1970s. She opened her headquarter in the Ndwedwe district, approximately 50 km north of *Ekuphakameni*.

Ma Mpungose's profile as a prophetess underwent a dramatic change. Formerly, she had addressed her audiences as the medium of Isaiah Shembe. It was his spirit that acted in her, and the words she uttered were his words. But now, Ma Mpungose's prophetic ingenuity invented a completely different argument of images: she performed as Isaiah Shembe *revivendus*. Stressing her intimate connection with the charismatic church founder, Ma Mpungose was wearing habits, gowns and dance uniforms that resembled those Isaiah Shembe had once worn. She was seen wearing Isaiah's white helmet and long trousers and added to it some items known from the female uniforms, such as a black umbrella and a small shield.⁴³ Whereas she had insisted on very strict rules for the use of ceremonial garb in the NBC, in her own outfit she thus transgressed the gendered use of attire by symbolic inversion.⁴⁴ Coming back to A.K. Shembe's praise-song, we are justified in identifying Ma Mpungose as one of the mysterious “misled women who had already turned their leather kilts inside out”. With this extraordinary *bricolage*, Ma Mpungose stressed the importance of Isaiah Shembe. Still supported by her secret visions that, she claimed, revealed the “unknown Isaiah Shembe”, her body message made Isaiah the undisputable norm. By doing so, she put in question the leadership qualities of his contemporary dynastic successors. Wearing Isaiah-type uniforms was more than just mimicry.⁴⁵ In the eyes of believers Isaiah's clothes stored the prophetic power of the founder. To see them, or even to touch them meant to experience his presence and his charismatic power. It was J.G. Shembe who established this belief in the magic performance of Isaiah's uniform. Jacqueline Eberhardt, a French sociologist of religion, visited *Ekuphakameni* in the mid 1950s. She observed how J.G. Shembe still sought to convince his followers of his close relationship with his father, who had died some twenty years earlier. One church official explained to her that J.G. Shembe inherited the powers of Isaiah only because he entertained close contact with him. The best way to show this was to use material objects

42 Seemingly, the controversies between Londa and Ma Mpungose had become so serious that she was obliged to leave.

43 Analysis of a video by G.C. Oosthuizen on the church of Ma Mpungose (1985; private collection G.C. Oosthuizen). For a genealogy of these items, see Heuser, Shembe (footnote 1), Chapter 9.3.

44 Reversals or symbolic inversions are an essential part of diviners' participation in Zulu religious life. Being part of ritual actions, they are seen as bringing about positive effects (cf. A.-I. Berglund, *Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism*, Cape Town 1976, pp. 371–381).

45 E. Bronfen and B. Marius, *Einleitung*, in: E. Bronfen/B. Marius (eds.), *Hybride Kulturen. Beiträge zur anglo-amerikanischen Multikulturalismusdebatte*, Tübingen 1997, pp. 1–29 (here: S. 13) define mimicry (in line with Homi Bhabha) as a cultural means to transform the dominant layers of power from inside.

of Isaiah, such as clothes worn by him in ritual settings. Eberhardt writes:

*Il détient les mêmes pouvoirs que son père, mais seulement s'il reste en contact avec l'esprit de son père défunt ; c'est pourquoi ... il utilise, pour guérir, les vêtements et les tissus qui ont touchés le corps de son père.*⁴⁶

The successor's charisma depended on the materialised presence of his father; his authority was a borrowed one, pointing again to the source of NBC history, the founding prophet. Ma Mpungose did not have any family relationship with Isaiah Shembe. So she had to push this argument and revive Isaiah Shembe's charismatic power as his medium. As the medium of Isaiah Shembe, Ma Mpungose had crossed another frontier in supernatural experience: using her prophetic attire as a mnemonic device, the voice of Shembe had become the bodily identity of Isaiah Shembe. Indeed, her revitalisation of the founder made the church members "look backwards" and seek refuge in the golden era of the NBC.

Ma Mpungose's interpretation of NBC history became a role-model for self-styled female leadership in the NBC. Another woman by the name of Magwensa "made the same story".⁴⁷ Her prophecy connected historical analysis and symbolic action, too. The church's history, she proclaimed, was a story of decline, and what was needed was a complete restart of the movement. She also called for a fresh beginning under the guidance of a charismatic prophetess. She was obviously convinced – the traces of her theological thinking are almost non-existent – that even the original sacred space of *Ekuphakameni* was ritually too impure to revive the ideas of Isaiah Shembe. Therefore, she set up a similar church in Ntuzuma, in close proximity to *Ekuphakameni*. In doing so she copied the symbolic repertoire of the old sacred city of Shembe. The outlook of Magwensa's new headquarter adapted the same emblems of protection. The premise was surrounded by whitewashed stones, and a big white star in the centre became the spatial marker of historical identity.⁴⁸ This was exactly the same type of symbolic architecture that had been used by Isaiah Shembe when he founded the NBC.

The aftermath of both, Ma Mpungose and Magwensa, is quickly told: their splinter churches did not grow substantially. Magwensa's success was short-lived, and some members soon returned to the NBC main branch under A.K. Shembe.⁴⁹ Ma Mpungose's church was more stable and formed a solid organisation with a small hierarchical scheme. But it also suffered a severe blow after almost a decade of existence. Her church disintegrated when she passed away in 1988.⁵⁰ Since then she has been deleted from the oral memories of other NBC branches.

46 J. Eberhardt, *Messianisme en Afrique du Sud*, in: *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* 4 (1957), pp. 31-56 (here: pp. 53-54).

47 Bongani Mthembu, statement in a letter to A.H., 27 January 2003.

48 The star is connected to Halley's Comet, which could be seen in the whole of Southern Africa in 1910 and induced a number of African preachers, including Shembe, to start their own church. In church jargon it became the Star of Zion, or David's Star.

49 Information from Bongani Mthembu (letter to A.H., 27 January 2003).

50 Personal communication with G.C. Oosthuizen on 11 January 1998, Durban-Westville.

The End of Female Charismatic Leadership

A synthesis of female visionary praxis in the NBC results in an interesting mix of ideological and symbolic arguments. Female prophetic quality was substantiated by a thorough knowledge of church history and by an apt interpretation of the church's ritual and moral codes. Ma Mpungose acted as political and spiritual advisor to Londa Shembe, a prophetess like Mama Dainah Zama gave expression to an early religio-political ideology that corresponded in a way to later forms of Zulu nationalism. Ma Mpungose and Magwensa claimed the right to formal leadership. Magwensa's opposition to the male-dominated branches of the NBC showed itself by her relocating the original sacred space laid out by Isaiah Shembe. Both women transgressed gender boundaries based on visionary plausibility by their common claim to represent the original voice – and even body – of the founder. Both claimed to be the right interpreters of the way of Isaiah Shembe – just like the prototype set by the “angels” of the 1930s. The “angels” had already pointed to the founding prophet as the critical norm and the ultimate source of NBC collective identity.

As we have already seen in the prose of an early praise-song addressed to A.K. Shembe, the major section of the church outlawed such prophetic criticism from so-called “misled women”. The term used in the praise-song, however, does not have the same weight of denunciation as the one used by J.G. Shembe to define prophetic aberration. In sermons dating back to the 1960s J.G. Shembe literally demonised prophetic activity in his church. He refers to “the demon of Mdolomba”, an idiom he used to crush inner-church protest movements. On one occasion his preaching almost certainly referred indirectly to Ma Mpungose's mimetic praxis: “There are many people who transform themselves to Shembe”, he ended a sermon during the July festival in 1965. “If Satan wants to deceive the people, he *wears beautiful clothes like Shembe, and his face may be transformed to that of Shembe* – only to find that it is Satan.”⁵¹

Nonetheless, during J.G. Shembe's lifetime, the expulsion of prophetesses was not an issue. They had to face church discipline but not excommunication. Only with the disruption of church unity in the late 1970s did the actions of “misled women” pose crucial questions: how to canalise their disruptive energy and how to control better the visionary experience of prophetesses. The schism called for new measures to exclude women from access to any central leadership position. In retrospect, several strategies of exclusion may be discerned. The one we have discussed so far was that of the administrative execution of hierarchical control through the excommunication of a prophetess (Ma Mpungose) or their eviction from sacred places (Magwensa). In comparison with the efforts to establish a socially coherent church body by memory production as in the case of A.K. Shembe's praise-song, the extinction of charismatic personalities like Ma Mpungose and Magwensa from NBC memory is another striking feature of control. Additionally, it also

51 Sermon of J.G. Shembe, 17 July 1965 (italics mine). If there were predecessors of Ma Mpungose in the NBC, or whether she acted already as a Shembe revivodus, I do not know.

seemed necessary to dismantle the theological arguments of prophetesses that relied on an interpretation of the founder-prophet, Isaiah Shembe. This gave way to a new style of theologising about “Shembe”. The arguments with which to counter the theology of female prophetic leaders in the NBC transcended the historic figure of Isaiah to establish a broader ideological complex. The heartbeat of this complex still begins with Isaiah, but he constitutes an integral part of the Shembe dynasty of church leaders. Consequently, Isaiah Shembe acts no more as a critical instance of NBC decline. He is now seen as the beginner of a tradition, whose continuity is secured by his successors, who are chosen from his sons and grand-sons.

When A.K. Shembe died in October 1995, he was succeeded by his only son, Vimbeni Shembe (b. 1933). However, his ascendance to leadership was disputed for several weeks, and a minor succession conflict arose. Vimbeni’s opponent was Nyathikazi Shembe (b. 1947), another son of J.G. Shembe. He did not appeal to a big constituency in the NBC. The dispute was brought to court and settled there in favour of Vimbeni Shembe by mid-1996. The leadership irritations ended without further consequences for the main NBC branch.⁵²

However, one religious feature of this succession dispute is remarkable. Unlike all other succession conflicts in the life of the church, there were no visionary “angels” in sight, nor was the voice of a prophetess to be heard. Instead, another voice became important in the competition for power for the first time in NBC history. Vimbeni’s success relied on the support by “*Baba wase Nhlankakazi*”, Gqibokubi Henry Shembe (b. 1930). The “Father of the *Nhlankakazi*” is the only remaining son of Isaiah Shembe, yet he did not gain recognition as his legitimate son until the late 1940s. Henry Shembe grew up in his mother’s family within sight of Mount *Nhlankakazi*. In 1948 he was baptized into the NBC by his brother, J.G. Shembe. Still, for many years he held no position of authority in the church. Nor has Henry Shembe ever been mentioned to any researcher in the field. But now Henry holds a respected, though informal position in the NBC. Although it has taken a few decades for him to be recognised by each and every church member, his ritual role is important. He officiated during the burial of A.K. Shembe, and he opens the great annual dance festival in July; the distinct robes he wears are exclusively reserved for the chiefs (*amakhozi*) in the NBC and for himself. After Vimbeni Shembe, who is three years younger than his uncle, came to power, he was made his close advisor in church affairs.⁵³

52 The proceedings are well documented in the Zulu newspaper *Ilanga*, especially in the November/December 1996 issues, see A. Heuser/P. Körner/A. Rosenfeld, Gendered Leadership in South African Churches, in: *Journal for the Study of Religion* 17 (2004), H. 2, pp. 67-101, p. 75. For a brief summary of the succession dispute, cf. also J. Tishken, Whose Nazareth Baptist Church? Prophecy, Power, and Schism in South Africa, in: *Nova Religio* 9 (2005), pp. 79-97 (here: 92-93).

53 Interviews with Gqibokubi Henry Shembe on 24 and 25 July 1996, Ebuheni. Interview with Bishop Vimbeni Shembe on 19 June 1996, Ebuheni. In view of the general hagiography that evolved around Isaiah Shembe it is easy to see why many church members never believed Henry to be a son of the founder.

Henry Shembe's importance came to public attention during the succession conflict between Vimbeni and Nyathikazi Shembe. He turned out to be one of the leading sources of NBC history, and his testimony in court had considerable influence on the outcome of the said succession dispute. Several affidavits produced in the court case in favor of Vimbeni Shembe portrayed him as the witness of a nomination regulation by Isaiah Shembe which mentioned the succession from Isaiah to J.G. Shembe, and then from J.G. to A.K. Shembe. According to Henry Shembe, his father once spoke during a January festival on the *Nhlangakazi* mountain in a parable to announce his succession. He was asking the congregation what brings light during the day, and they replied that it was the sun. Then he asked them what brings light after the sun has set and they replied it is the moon. Thereupon he called J.G. Shembe the “Sun” and A.K. Shembe the “Moon”. When the sun sets, the parable ends, the moon rises.⁵⁴ The praise-names of Isaiah's sons encompass a theory of succession!

In the first place this information from Henry Shembe authorised the factual leadership decision against the former claims of Londa Shembe in the late 1970s. That is why in the majority faction of the NBC only J.G. Shembe is commonly known as the “Sun” and A.K. Shembe as the “Moon”. In the second place through this episode and through his biological closeness to Isaiah Shembe, Henry Shembe became a key person to decide on the right procedure for nominating a leader. His loyalty pointed at Vimbeni Shembe as the sole inheritor of A.K. Shembe's position. This rule of succession was soon given a theological twist.

In a sermon delivered only four weeks after Amos Shembe had passed away, a “trinitarian” concept of leadership within the NBC was developed. The preacher, Rev. Mdluli, had been baptized by Isaiah in 1933 and had a reputation as a living memory of church history. On 25 October 1995, he preached in one of the oldest and biggest Durban NBC congregations. He made mention of the rising conflict between Vimbeni and Nythikazi that had become obvious within that same week. Nyathikazi Shembe had announced that on one of the following Sundays he would be ordained as leader of the NBC. Rev. Mdluli commented on those recent developments. In allusion to Isaiah Shembe's parable of succession as narrated by Henry Shembe, he referred to Vimbeni as the “morning star” – the morning star which follows the moon. He even went one step further by explaining that Vimbeni was “the image” of Isaiah:

I've seen the first body (Isaiah), the second (J.G.) and the third body (A.K.). The word of God says: there is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Now, with these words you can see that the fourth body has raised up (Vimbeni). This body now is the fourth body. There are three components of God – so are three components of Shembe: the first, the second and the fourth body. Now it means today: the first body has returned. Just like the sun

54 Supreme Court of South Africa, Durban and Coast Local Division, Case No. 7744/95 (here: affidavit of G.H. Shembe. See also the affidavit of S.K. Khubisa).

*sets, God will make the sun to raise again. The fourth body now is the the image of the first body. That is how in heaven they are working.*⁵⁵

Thus, the wisdom of heaven equates Vimbeni with his grandfather, Isaiah. In Vimbeni a trinitarian circle is completed and the founding era has been resurrected. Again, the theologically based argument leads back to the person of Isaiah Shembe. Obviously, just like the female prophetic opposition in the 1970s and 1980s, and just like the earlier appearance of some “angels” in the 1930s, the authority of the founder-prophet has become the dominant aspect in the solution of succession conflicts in the NBC. The difference is obvious, too. Earlier on prophetic female activity accompanied the sensitive transition periods of succession in church leadership. Prophetesses either legitimised the political status of the new leader or they disputed his leadership ambitions. Since 1990, however, female charismatic authority has been appropriated by male memory-keepers while the legitimacy of female visionary experience has been replaced by the claim of “original witnesses” to define NBC history.

Seen in terms of the historical context of political developments in South Africa, a pattern emerges. In the NBC the phenomenon of female visionary power occurred in critical times of transition. Charismatic women backed Isaiah Shembe’s passage from wandering prophet to church-founder, and others supported Johannes Galilee Shembe’s shift from an inexperienced teacher to church leader. Thus, female visionaries guided the formative years of the first NBC leaders. It was only during the 1960s and 1970s, when Apartheid became firmly consolidated and resistance almost completely silenced, that female charismatic voices changed into critical voices of power. In that time two great prophetesses – Mama Dainah Zama and Ma Mpungose – took up charismatic leadership by proclaiming visions that had a destabilising potential in church life. Ma Mpungose even strove for legal power, but remained largely unsuccessful. In the 1990s, when Black power had been gained in the political sphere, female church leadership decreased.⁵⁶ Having existed for nearly a century, prophetic female power has now been silenced. The NBC forms part of South Africa’s sacred topography as a religious body purely dominated by male power.

55 Sermon by Rev. Mdluli, 22 October 1995, Dalton Road, Durban. Rev. Mdluli (b. 1913) died in 1998. Nyathikazi Shembe’s ordination service took place on 5 November 1995 in a remote Zululand temple.

56 See also the comparative analysis of mainline and African Independent Churches, in: Heuser/Körner/Rosenfeld, *Gendered Leadership* (footnote 52).