

# THE USE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF WATER IN THE ZION CHRISTIAN CHURCH

*Lazarus Lebeloane*

Department of Further Education  
University of South Africa, Pretoria

*Mokhele Madise*

Church History, Missiology and Christian Spirituality  
University of South Africa, Pretoria

## *Abstract*

Humanity discovered the curative properties of water more than 4 000 years ago. This can be seen in the way in which people were drawn over time to natural resources such as springs, fountains, rivers and wells to wash in and drink from in the belief that they would be healed and their pains would end. African Independent Churches in South Africa also use water, one of the natural resources, to facilitate the completion of their rituals. Amongst these churches is the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), which will be the focal point of this article. An introductory section is followed by a brief historical background to the use of water. A discussion of the use of different types of water in the ZCC follows. Lastly, conclusions are drawn.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Aim of the article**

The aim of this article is to describe the use of water in the ZCC and the spiritual power derived from it. Water is one of the natural resources without which any living species – animals, people and plants – cannot survive. It serves a multiplicity of purposes in the lives of each of these species. Over and above these purposes, humanity discovered the curative properties of water more than 4 000 years ago. This can be seen in many ways, including, for example, the way in which people were drawn to springs, fountains, rivers, and wells to wash in and drink from these natural resources in the belief that their wounds would be healed and pains eased (Lanz 1995:60). This practice continued among various people as well as organisations and bodies throughout the world although it took on various forms over time. Organisations such as the Mainline Churches, African Independent Churches and the Charismatic Churches also adopted the use of water, among other natural resources, to facilitate the completion of their respective procedures and processes such as baptism and cleansing. One of the reasons for the use of water in the church is that it was and continues to be regarded as sacred in the apostolic tradition.

African Independent Churches in South Africa also use water to facilitate the completion of their rituals (Kunnie 1992:6). These churches include the International Pentecostal Christian Church (IPCC), which was founded by Bishop Modise (member of IPCC, 2005), and the St John Apostolic Church founded by Christina Nku (member of St John's Apostolic Church, 2005). Another African Independent Church which uses water to complete its rituals is the Zion Christian Church (hereinafter also referred to as the ZCC) (ZCC elder, 2005), which will be the focal point of this article. In many of these churches, water is also used as a natural resource with power (Kunnie 1992:6). The ZCC also identifies water as a natural resource which has curative properties. These can facilitate, according to the ZCC, cleansing, healing and therapeutic processes. This notion was confirmed by the researchers when they visited the ZCC to interview church elders (priests and prophets). Upon entering the church premises, they were sprinkled with water by a priest. However, they were not informed of the origin of that water, except that this is standard practice for everyone who enters the church premises, whether it is a member of the church or a visitor, to be sprinkled with blessed water (ZCC elder, 2005).

## **1.2 Methodology**

Water is a natural resource with power for the ZCC. This article highlights the use of water according to the reports from interviews with church priests and elders in the ZCC. In order to gather primary data, the researchers used a qualitative method, namely, the oral method of research, to gather information from the church elders of the ZCC. The researchers approached three ZCC senior members in the area of Tshwane Metropolitan (Pretoria) and requested them to organise about twenty church elders to participate in the interview. Twelve respondents agreed to participate in the interview, on condition that they (and the ZCC elders) remained anonymous. The researchers met their request because they respected their views and also felt that it was important to conduct this research. Data gathered from their responses to questions was used together with other documented data to facilitate the completion of this article. Much of the existing literature has focused on the general use of water in the African Independent Churches, but does not distinguish between the different uses of specific types of water by these churches. This article focuses on the use of specific types of water by the ZCC.

In this article, a brief historical background to the use of water is outlined. This is followed by reports on the use of different types water in the ZCC. Conclusions, which are based on the discussions, are then drawn.

## **2 A BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO THE USE OF WATER**

Water quenches the thirst of all living animal species such as mammals, reptiles and so on. Human beings also use water for farming and manufacturing items such as clay pots. The discovery of water as a resource for therapy, healing and its curative properties remains an historical mystery to

date. No one seems to know who, how and when this was discovered except that it goes back more than 4 000 years, as people were drawn to certain springs, fountains, rivers and confluences which were regarded as sacred (Lanz 1995:60). The purpose of going into and using these sources was mainly to wash themselves in water in the belief that their wounds would be healed, pains eased and so forth. During those times, diseases were thought to be a sign of divine wrath. Washing and bathing in sacred waters was seen as serving a dual function, namely, that of serving a rite of placating the gods and as a means of healing and curing the body. This discovery of water as sacred has its roots in a number of countries around the world. Some examples of these will be referred to in this article.

In Poland, for example, the tradition of bathing in curative waters is over a thousand years old (Lanz 1995:60). Some springs are venerated in Poland. An example is the 'Good Well' spring which people visited despite other springs in nearby villages (Lanz 1995:60). The ancient or folk knowledge on springs and their curative properties has been passed down from one generation to the next. The Czech Republic also has a number of springs such as the Karlovy Vary whose water is venerated. Glauber salts (sodium sulphate) and the fluorspar (calcium fluoride) in the water of the Karlovy Vary spring are drawn from it. The salt from this spring is regarded as having medicinal properties, which seem to be one of the primary reasons why many foreigners and local tourists visit that spring regularly to bathe among other things (Lanz 1995:60).

In New Zealand, hot springs were used for their curative powers (Lanz 1995:64). New Zealand's Maori people, for example, would meet at the village Ngawha Springs to talk, meditate and cure any ailments at Nga Waiariki or 'Chiefly Waters' (Lanz 1995:64). These Maori people passed down this tradition and practice orally from generation to generation (Lanz 1995:64).

During the era of the Hebrew Scriptures of the Bible, water was used for a multiplicity of purposes, including water being a home to aquatic species such as fish. It was also used for baptism, drinking, healing, washing and so on (Kunnie 1992:5). A number of scriptural texts testify to the use of water to facilitate and/or complete many ritual processes, as in the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan (Matthew 3:13-17). Another example is the washing of the disciples' feet by Jesus (John 13). The text of John 13 might be about servitude, although it must be borne in mind that the Zion Christian Church's purpose, amongst other things, is to cure the sick by using water to wash away their ailments and diseases through priests and prophets.

In Western Culture, water is a natural resource which is important in the completing of many processes. For example, it is one of the ingredients of many medicinal drugs which are dispensed to patients. Many mainline churches adopted and still adhere to the use of water to baptise, bless, washing the feet of church members and for other purposes. However, this water is blessed before use. Many Africans also use water to facilitate the completion of their ritual processes. For example, they drink it as a solution (water that is mixed with herbs and so on) to healing the sick. Some use its other properties to cleanse themselves.

South Africa is one of those countries which have natural water resources such as fountains, springs, wells and natural dams. For example, a town known as Bela-Bela (previously known as Warmbaths) in Limpopo Province is well known for its natural hot springs. People have, for a long time, visited those natural hot springs with the objective of either cleansing themselves, drawing water for drinking or even washing themselves. However, this has been commercialised with the building of guest houses, hotels and holiday resorts such as game farms around the area. Commercialising the hot spring water of Bela-Bela has taken away the naturalness and the interactive belief system of people with regard to the hot spring water.

Many African Indigenous Christian theologies continue to attach similar significance to the use of water. However, in Africa, the perception is that this tradition was adopted from the scriptures. This is in essence not true as confluences, fountains, rivers and springs are some of the old natural resources and means through which therapy and healing were carried out in Africa even before colonialism (ZCC elder, 2005). The use of *methokgoa* (herbs) together with water for bathing, drinking and/or cleansing the environment is much older than the scriptural tradition (ZCC elder, 2005). Water is perceived as a gift from the Creator. It is further understood to have life-giving and life-invigorating power if it has been blessed by either a minister of religion or a traditional healer (called *inyanga* or *ngaka*). Such water is regarded as *isiwasho* (holy water in the Zulu language of South Africa) (Kunnie 1992:6). Many African Indigenous Christian theologies give people holy water to either bath in, drink and/or cleanse their environments. The ZCC is no exception in this regard. A discussion on the use of specific water in the ZCC follows.

### 3 THE USE OF DIFFERENT TYPES OF WATER IN THE ZCC

Many African Indigenous Christian theologies attach similar significance to a place of water (Kunnie 1992:5). They attribute this to the baptism of Jesus with water in the River Jordan which gave him the spiritual power to launch his ministry. At the same time it is symbolic of the power of the Creator, since water is essential to life itself. For example, water is used for cleansing, purification, blessing and exorcism rites (Kunnie 1992:5). Significant within the ZCC is the use of specific water as having curative properties (ZCC elder, 2005).

The ZCC has members who are themselves priests and or prophets. They prophesy to anybody whether they are a member of the church or not but who have problems and/or suffer from any ailment and thus need spiritual help. This does not mean the ZCC uses this as a marketing tool to increase its membership (ZCC elder, 2005). Individuals decide, after being helped by the church, to either join or not join the church. Priests and/or prophets use water, among other things, as a source of relief for the problems and ailments which people are suffering from. Depending on the problems or ailments, the priest or prophet will know the type of water a person will need to cure him or her after listening to and/or examining him or her. As part of the priests' and or prophets' ministry, they sometimes request, among other things, people to

draw water from various environments to be prayed over and to be used in completing the rituals of the church. Based on the preceding notions, the discussion below examines the use of different types of water from various sources in the ZCC (ZCC elder, 2005).

### **3.1 The use of water from a spring (*metsi a motswedi*)**

According to the ZCC, a prophet or priest may request a person (who may be a member of the church or not), depending on the nature of his or her problem or ailment, to bring *metsi a motswedi* (water from a spring) to the church so that it can be blessed by the same priest or prophet to relieve that person's problem or ailment. In the case of ailments, people may be requested to draw water from hot springs. Hot water from springs is believed to be therapeutic in treating bodily ailments. It soothes away pains caused, for example, by rheumatism. Spring water is also used primarily for drinking according to one of the church elders (2005). However, the person who has to drink that water is advised (according to a church elder, 2005) to boil it before drinking so that it is free from any harmful substances (such as germs).

### **3.2 The use of water from a fountain or water fall (*metsi a leshata*)**

Water from a fountain or water fall is regarded as *metsi a leshata* (literally meaning 'noisy water') in the ZCC. This, the researchers assume, is due to the sound or noise caused by this water as it falls from an upper point to a lower point in both a fountain and a water fall. However, upon requesting the church elders to differentiate between the water from a fountain and water from a water fall, they emphasised the importance of using 'noisy water' (*metsi a leshata*). They respectively did not seem to be interested in whether the water was drawn from a fountain or water fall. This water is used for external purposes according to a ZCC elder (2005). As with *metsi a motswedi*, this water needs to be prayed over. It is used for either washing the body or sprinkling the environment such as the home (in and/or outside). According to a ZCC elder (2005), water from a fountain or waterfall which has been prayed over is used for therapy such as washing the body. That means it can be used by the individual or his or her family. It also serves to get rid of, among other things, demons and evil spirits in the home environment. This water is not necessarily boiled because it is for external use.

### **3.3 The use of water from a flowing river (*metsi a noka e e elelang*)**

Water from a flowing river (*metsi a noka e e elelang*), like water from a fountain or water fall, is mainly used for external purposes, including cleansing the body or environment and individuals of ailments they may be suffering from. It is also used for casting out evil spirits. People who come to the church seeking help from the priest or a prophet are usually told to draw water from a flowing river. Water from a flowing river is believed to carry curative properties as it flows from one point to another through different environments such as valleys, villages and water falls. The priest or prophet will normally bless the water before it can be used externally.

### **3.4 The use of water from a confluence (*metsi a matlhakanelo a dinoka*)**

Like other types of environments from which water is drawn by ZCC members, they also use water from a confluence (*metsi a matlhakanelo a dinoka*). Water from a confluence like that from a flowing river is believed to be carrying curative properties as it flows from different directions to meet at specific point. It is at this point that ZCC members prefer to draw water because they believe that it brings curative properties from different environments such as valleys, villages and water falls. This water is used in the ZCC for external purposes which include cleansing the body and home environment. If a person has to cast out evil spirits from the body or home, he or she may be told to bring such water. The latter is prayed over in the church and then used according to the priest or prophet's instructions. *Metsi a matlhakanelo a dinoka* does not need to be boiled before use (church elder, 2005).

### **3.5 The use of water from the sea/ocean (*metsi a lewatle*)**

Water from the sea/ocean (*metsi a lewatle*) is used by many indigenous churches throughout South Africa. This water is believed to possess divine power to cleanse and heal (Kunnie 1992:6). Sea or ocean water is popular among many people in South Africa for various reasons. These include that it is clean and many people believe that sea or ocean water can clean their bodies. The African Independent Churches, which include the ZCC, also use it for baptism, healing and cleansing services and rites. Some of the reasons for using it (according to the church elders, 2005), are that all rivers flow into the sea. That is, the sea or ocean contains all the curative of waterfalls, flowing rivers, fountains and confluences. Sea water is also salty. The salt of sea water is believed to facilitate the casting out of evil spirits. Many churches near the coast hold ceremonies such as baptism, healing and cleansing services and rites on the beach itself. Priests, prophets, members of the church or other individuals (such as non-church members) who need such water for their well-being but live further inland often request people who visit the coast to bring them sea water in containers (church elders 2005).

The popularity and belief in sea and ocean water are basically taken from the traditional context in which not only the churchgoers but non-churchgoers as well are attracted to the curative power it possesses.

## **4 CONCLUSION**

The use of water for its curative properties is as old as the existence of people. This tradition has been passed down from one generation to the next in different ways. In some cultures it has been passed down through documentation. In others it has been through oral tradition, while for some it was through ritual practice which may be seasonal. In spite of this tradition being very old, it has managed to sustain itself throughout the different eras. It seems that in most African countries it has been kept as original as possible, unlike in a number of other countries around the world which have applied logical empirical technology to analyse the water with the intention of finding the secrets behind its curative powers.

The ZCC has used and continues to use different types of water such as that from a spring, fountain, flowing river, confluence and the sea/ocean because it

has power for the church, once it has been prayed over. It is through the mysteries of the water from these sources that individuals seek help from the church (particularly from the African Independent Churches). This has been a ground-breaking phenomenon for the ZCC because of its uniqueness to cultural links in and to Africa.

## **WORKS CONSULTED**

Gottlieb, R S (ed) 2004. *This sacred earth: Religion, nature, environment*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. London: Routledge.

Heher, M 2004. *The lost art of walking on water: Reimagining the priesthood*. New York: Paulist.

Jenkins, K & Munslow, A (eds) 2004. *The nature of history reader*. London: Routledge.

Kunnie, J 1992. Indigenous African Churches and religio-cultural liberation: The practice of traditional healing. Unpublished paper presented at the Thirty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, Seattle, Washington.

Lanz, K 1995. *The Greenpeace book of water*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles.

Machacek, D W & Wilcox, M M (eds) 2003. *Sexuality and the world's religions*. California: ABC Clio.

## **Interviews**

Face to face: Zion Christian Church leaders, elders, priests and prophets. Mamelodi (Pretoria East), September 2005.