

WHERE ARE THE CHILDREN? AN INVESTIGATION OF THE
PRESENCE OF SPACE FOR CHILDREN IN THE WORSHIP LIFE
OF THE NAZARITE BAPTIST CHURCH AND THE ZION
CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Radikobo Ntsimane
School of Religion and Theology
University of KwaZulu-Natal

Abstract

As nativistic movements both the NBC and the ZCC do not have programs designed for the spiritual needs of children. This paper argues that the reason for this is to be found in the history of the founding of the two churches. Since they were founded to respond to the prevailing political and ecclesiological oppression of the time, the two AICs left the spiritual nurturing of children to their families, in the hope that their needs in adulthood would cause them to become full church members.

1 INTRODUCTION

Having emerged from the cultural milieu of the Zulus and the Pedis, the Nazarite Baptist Church, or Ibandla LamaNazaretha (NBC) and the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) have both experienced phenomenal growth, growth that has attracted researchers from various disciplines.¹ This phenomenal growth has been explained primarily as a consequence of the socio-political and religio-cultural domination of colonial powers and mission societies of European origin (Makhubu 1988; Moripe 1995; Vilakazi, Mthethwa & Mpanza 1986). To date, however, the participation of children in the worship life of the two denominations has not been researched.

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My assumption is that children are not regarded as important members of the two African Initiated Churches (AICs), being researched. In this paper I shall attempt to show, how, in the two AICs, prepubescent children are placed on the margins during the worship service. The worship service does not have space clearly designated for children's participation as it does for adult men and women. I shall use the available literature on the subject and the information obtained from two interviews to show this. I shall explain the religio-cultural milieu in which these churches function. That milieu, I will argue, necessitated that the two churches worship structures be designed as they presently are. Finally, I shall discuss the space and lack of space in the worship life of the NBC and ZCC that is designed to make children into Nazarites and Zionists. The present practices of the two churches are informed by the circumstances around which the two churches were founded. A brief discussion on the founding of these two churches will help to understand the present practice of excluding children from active participation in the churches' worship life.

2 THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCHES

In order to understand the practice of the NBC and the ZCC regarding children, it is imperative that one looks at their founding principles. I have chosen to research these two churches because they share many similarities. They form the best examples of the Messianic-type AICs (Pillay & Hofmeyer 1991:262) and their founders are regarded by their followers as royalty and are treated as such. They are addressed as *inkosi* and *kgoshi* in isiZulu and Sepedi respectively and their leadership is hereditary (Moripe 1995:104; Vilakazi, Mthethwa & Mpanza 1986:71). The churches are rooted in the cultures of their founders, who both came from other churches before founding their own. Isaiah Shembe of the NBC went to the Wesleyan Church but was baptised in the Baptist Church in 1906 in Harrismith in the Free State (Gunner 2004:18-19). Having worked as a preacher for sometime his mentor, Rev Leshega, ordained him to preach and baptise (Gunner 2004:20). Bishop Engenas Lekganyane founded his Zion Christian Church (ZCC) after leaving the Zion

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Apostolic Faith Mission of his friend Edward Motaung of Lesotho (Anderson 1992:40).

There are historical² and cultural³ reasons that led Shembe and Lekganyane to found their own churches. On examining how the two AICs were founded it is important to look at the doctrine and practice of the mission churches of the time. The mission churches⁴ attempted to transplant their home churches⁵ onto African soil. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, preaching, teaching and worship were still carried out as they were in the home churches in Europe and America. That is despite the fact that the situation in Europe and America was different from that in Africa. While they were striving to teach the right doctrines, the missionaries in the nineteenth century made no effort to relate their faith in God to other denominations and indigenous people. Indeed, they treated the indigenous people inhumanely, as can be seen in the attempts of Ordinance 50 to improve the living conditions of indigenous people. This inhumane treatment by the colonists continued until the declaration of the Union of South Africa in 1910.

The NBC and the ZCC were founded around this time, when racial discrimination intensified with Land Acts of 1913 and 1936. I would like to mention a few specific events and conditions that possibly led to the founding of the NBC. Having grown up in the racially oriented Free State, Shembe had undoubtedly experienced discrimination from whites. His association with his mentor Reverend Leshega exposed him to challenges faced by independent Christian leaders in dealing with government bureaucracy. Leshega was expelled from Witzieshoek (Qwaqwa) by the machinations of a jealous Dutch Reformed minister and, in a separate incident, was refused permission to build a church in Harrismith (Gunner 2004:20).

The challenges facing black people were not confined to the emerging black church leaders; they extended to the wider socio-political environment, as we shall see below. The emergence of Shembe as a prophet and the founding of his church came about a short while after the colonial government had intensified its repressive reign through the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910. Similar to the Xhosa Cattle Killings, around 1905, out of sheer

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frustration with the British colonial powers, King Dinuzulu ka Cetshwayo was suspected of decreeing that the Zulus should destroy items that represented European presence in his kingdom. Pots, pans, and white cows, goats and fowls were destroyed as a result of a rumour called *umhlola*, which stated that the situation of the Zulus would improve (Carton 2000:121). In 1906 the Zulus of Natal, where Shembe relocated and established his church, rose up in rebellion against the imposition of the Poll Tax. As if the protests of the black people were not enough, the new government passed the Land Act of 1913 as the first of its steps to exclude blacks from owning enough fertile land within the borders of the Union. Besides the formation of the NBC, there were other reactions by blacks against the repressive measures of the colonial government. Some of the isolated opposition against white colonial rule came together in the form of the South African Native National Congress (SANNC). SANNC was formed by missionary educated blacks whose leadership was made up of clerks, clergy and small businesspeople who tried to harness the resentments of the black masses in order to counter colonial hegemony (Thompson 1990:156).

It is against that background that NBC should be understood. Absalom Vilakazi whose book, *Shembe: The revitalisation of African Society* has already been referred to above, has rightly identified this church as one of the Nativistic Movement.⁶ He writes:

These movements, which occurred in most of the then colonized world, were responses of the colonized peoples to the conquering and oppressive impact of European socio-cultural domination over the traditional Zulu society was felt through the years of colonialism and imperialism (Vilakazi, Mthethwa & Mpanza 1986:x).

In order to revitalise the cultural Zulu way of life which at the time was being corroded by colonial power, Shembe organised his church along strong Zulu cultural lines. The tenets and practices he emphasised were geared at responding to Zulu frustrations and aspirations in a religio-cultural hostile environment. These aspirations included the quest for health and food in a racially and culturally hostile environment.

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The founding of the ZCC was not dissimilar to that of the NBC. Children are not mentioned in the visions. Through a call and a vision (Moripe 1995:104), Lekganyane found his own church and planted it among his Pedi people with its headquarters in Moria, Limpopo. As a Pedi himself, the founder knew that *boloi*, sorcery, rated as the most feared practice among his people. His vision was about healing sick people, the major reason for which was sorcery.⁷ Explaining the dangers for which his church provides protection, my ZCC informant, Mr Kgaria, does not leave out sorcery, "Well, obviously the first danger we talk about is things like smoking, like drinking, like girls, and if ... obviously protection is in the belief of praying. That ... when you bring in the church you are asking the God to actually protect you so that you do not get exposed to dangers." As is well known, in African culture there is a belief in *boloi* (sorcery) and similar phenomena. When you are baptised, *o phetha ditaelo* (you follow ritual instructions), you will probably have more protection against *boloi*.

Moennig (1967:71), in his book *The Pedi*, gives a vivid explanation of the Pedi's daily fear of *boloi*,

To the Pedi witchcraft (*boloi*) represents all that is evil and destructive. It is loathed and feared more than anything else and is a force which is even recognized by many who have become Christians. In the present time, when the smelting-out of witches and any legal action against them has been forbidden by law for many decades, it still remains one of the topics most frequently discussed, and which can be overheard daily.

The electronic and print media news from Limpopo Province in general and from the Pedi people in particular is characterised by reports that the villagers have either identified and severely punished a sorcerer or that a ritually murdered corpse has been discovered. Moennig's further explanation indicates that *boloi* continues to permeate Pedi society as a real fear.

Although it is today by law an actionable wrong to accuse anybody of witchcraft or even indirectly to refer to a person

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as a witch, the Pedi all know who are the recognized witches in their community and will secretly point them out to you. No overt restrictions are placed on the movements of such witches, and they are freely permitted to take part in all activities, but they are combated by all known magical means. When they participate in the activities of any group, their presence causes an immediate change in the atmosphere, a change of which they certainly must be aware (Moennig, 1967:71).

Since the aim of sorcerers is to destroy *bophelo/impilo* through *boloi*, measures or antidotes to counter *boloi* were already in place in the pre-Christian milieu of the Pedi. And, since sorcery permeates Pedi life, the ZCC worship services are geared at providing health and, especially, at diffusing sorcery. Lekganyane has made traditional healers redundant. His members find their wellbeing taken care of in the ZCC. Since the churches do not allow their members to use traditional and conventional medicine, they find *bophelo* and peace for their children in their churches.

The second issue mentioned by Kgaria as being of concern to members of his church is *go tshilafala*, ritual impurity. Moennig's research also discusses this ritual impurity (*ditshila*) under the chapter dealing with rites of passage (Moennig 1967:99). Lekganyane crafted his church's practice to deal with *go tshilafala*, in response to his peoples' daily concern. He introduced *ditaelo* (ritual instructions) that include the use of holy water to drive out evil and counter sorcery and the drinking of holy tea to keep healthy. Kgaria explained this practice thus,

Ditaelo o ka diphetha even before baptism. But *ditaelo* all what it means is that you know as Africans we believe that you get healed when there is something that you have taken like a drink or whatever. But in this case *ditaelo* is water and the priest should have a holy paper that comes from the church which he would actually *a rapelele metsi ka yona* (a piece of holy paper he uses to pray over the water). That water will be seen as holy and you can either drink it or he sprinkles it over you.

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I concur with Moripe (1995:107), where he concludes in reference to ZCC that,

The African Indigenous Churches are indeed setting the pace because they stay with the people and maintain what is of special value in the indigenous African religious and cultural tradition. Nowhere do Africans find their spiritual feet better than in the African context.

In the light of the above, let us now look at the space provided for children in order to investigate how such space makes them into Nazarites and Zionists. My hypothesis is that children do not feature prominently as children in the two AICs. I am going to show that the sacred space for children is not clearly defined, thereby leaving no provision for their spiritual nurturing in the life of these churches.

3 BORN INTO ITS KIND OR CONVERTED INTO ITS KIND: AN INTERROGATION OF THE SPACE FOR NURTURING CHILDREN AS NAZARITES OR ZIONISTS

Are the children in the two AICs born as Nazarites and Zionists or are they converted into these denominations? According to my two informants there are no conscious and overt attempts to integrate children into the worship life of their churches.

As nativistic and revitalistic movements, the NBC and the ZCC have respectively preserved and continue to promote Zulu and Pedi religio-cultural practices within their churches. As can be expected of traditional churches, children have no say in important family matters. Various cultures in Africa have a certain age or rituals such as rites of passage⁸ that determine people's entrance into adulthood. At his father Cetshwayo's funeral, Dinuzulu, who was an heir to the Zulu throne, was not allowed at the graveside because he was still small.⁹

When asked how a child is converted or made into a Nazarite, Mr.Nsibande replied with a *sui generis* metaphor. He said that a cow

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gives birth to a cow; it is its own type. What he meant was that there was no special initiation processes aimed at making Nazarites out of children. They are automatically Nazarites by virtue of having Nazarite parentage.

In worship arrangement there is no specific space for pre-pubescent children in either the NBC or the ZCC. There is neither Sunday school nor confirmation class instruction for children. Vilakazi (1986:85) has observed formal instructions being given to NBC children in Ekuphakameni. Ekuphakameni is a settlement near Durban solely reserved for Nazarites. It has human resources and life is regulated by times and bells. At that stage in their development, the children of Nazarites have not yet had an opportunity to publicly declare their acceptance of the Lord of Ekuphakameni, according to Nsibande. It is clear that Nsibande here contradicts what he said earlier (about a cow giving birth to a cow). He replied that anyone who has not made a public declaration of accepting Shembe the Lord of Ekuphakameni during Sabbath worship is just an enquirer and not a church member.

In the NBC special instructions are only given formally to groups that are separated on a gender and age basis. All men and teenage boys, affectionately called *inhlalisuthi* (ever well-fed), meet monthly on 23rd for such instructions. Married women, called *jamengweni* (standing upon a leopard), meet by themselves on 14th of every month while maidens, called *amakhosazane* (princesses), meet monthly on 25th (Ntsimane, 2000:23). It is evident that pre-pubescent boys and girls are excluded from participation in monthly meetings of *inhlalisuthi* and *makhosazane* because matters discussed there are beyond their comprehension and practice.

Summarising what men discuss during the 23rd meeting, Mr Nsibande said, "In our case (men) we are taught how to avoid prevalent problems. As a Nazarite man you neither date, nor get a lover by any means. As a man your actions will be exposed by the prevalent disease. You will be asked where you got the disease from." The prevalent disease mentioned by Mr Nsibande is, of course, HIV/AIDS.

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The practice of avoiding women other than your wives for the purpose of ritual purity is also practiced in the ZCC. Mr Kgaria explained thus, "Our church does not believe in young men going out with girls before marriage. If you go out with girls at that age they say that *oa tshilafala* (you become ritually unclean)." While Mr Kgaria makes no reference to girls' restrictions in this matter, Mr Nsibande mentions that Nazarite girls are taught girls' things by one of their own who has some knowledge, "She is also an *inkosazane*. She teaches them, because she already knows their matter which I do not know." Nsibande is here referring to the Zulu traditional practice of sexual socialisation. Delius and Glaser (2002) cite Krige's work where it is explained that, among Zulus, older girls known as *amaqhikiza* played a crucial part in monitoring and managing the courtships. Dr Chris Ellis also mentions this practice of courtship where maidens are guided by an older girl¹⁰ in matters of courtship and sexuality. Children of pre-pubescent age are barred from this arrangement. Delius and Glaser (2002:41) maintain, "Sex, as was increasingly the case in the countryside, was a taboo subject of conversation, certainly until children reached puberty."

If full membership in the NBC is determined by public acceptance of Shembe and in the ZCC by baptism around age sixteen as Kgaria explained, then children are certainly excluded from participation as full members in both churches. Any boy with capability is allowed to participate in a dance called *mokhukhu* and in the ZCC in the marching group called *masole* (the army). Since the *mokhukhu* and *Masole* are open to boys even before baptism, ZCC choirs practise neither gender nor age discrimination.

One may ask how then do the two churches sustain growth without programmes for children in preparation for adult membership? As already mentioned, the two churches focus on practice rather than doctrine. It is the correct conduct rather than the correct belief that is emphasised in these churches. Practice is such that, when adhered to properly, members will reap the desired benefits. Having been founded in response to the felt needs of the Pedi and the Zulu people, practice in the two churches focuses on fear, sorcery and ritual uncleanliness, among others, as Vilakazi observed of the NBC. In other words, the church still meets a deeply felt cultural need

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(Vilakazi, Mthethwa & Mpanza 1986:53). The religio-cultural fears of the Zulus and the Pedis do not confine themselves to full members only. Similarly the benefits of the NBC and the ZCC are not confined to full members only. Like the ancestor cult, the church rituals performed by the head of the family will bring protection against illnesses and sorcery to all in the household.

It has been mentioned above that, as a Zulu nativistic and revitalistic¹¹ church, NBC retained ancestor veneration, but discarded traditional healing. As the veneration includes all family members, the NBC caters for children's members, 'disguising' them as NBC members. One can argue that those children of NBC and ZCC members who come to church services and participate in choirs are tolerated.

Healing and miracles play a major role in both the NBC and the ZCC. Regarding the NBC Vilakazi (1986:58) writes,

Our investigation showed that all the people who joined the church as adults, as distinct from those who were born in the church (and this accounts for nearly ninety percent of the church membership) did so because of illness. Many had diseases which they brought to be healed.

In explaining the practice of healing with water in his church Kgaria said, "The belief is that it will heal you, it will protect you, it will make sure that at all times you are free of dangers."

The ZCC has special protection for infants: a ZCC badge is pinned on the hat of the infant to protect against any possible illness that might befall him (or her). It should be borne in mind that the large membership of the two churches is made up of adults, most of whom have a parental obligation to raise their children properly. In church, children are the passive recipients of the blessings of the church until they are of the age that allows them to actively participate in worship.

It should be appreciated that, in their homes, children observe those church rituals that are performed in the confines of members' homes (these rituals are mainly to protect families and homes from the

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power of sorcery). The absence of space for pre-pubescent is related to the fact that parents in these two churches prefer rather to raise their children their traditional way rather than leave it to the church. They are attended to at home and raised in a manner that covertly prepares them for membership in their parents' churches. When children grow up in homes permeated with the fear of sorcery and constant ways of countering it, they obviously tend to identify with this form of belief. Later, when they reach the appropriate age, children will seek help from their parents' churches lest calamity befall them as a result of sorcery. It is these parents and adults who by virtue of age and marriage have acquired easy membership in the NBC and ZCC. Their parental obligation, like all functional parents, forces them to want to raise their children in a place free of fear of sorcery and illnesses. For them such a place is their churches, the NBC and the ZCC. A common characteristic during the worship services, which was mentioned in private conversation with NBC and ZCC members, is their witnessing to the miracles happening in their lives as a result of their church membership.

Three days after interviewing Mr Nsibande in Piet Retief, he called me to listen to, among other things, the miraculous near-death narratives from his Nazarite friend Mr Bembe. Liz Gunner has included near-death experiences in her book, *The man of heaven and the beautiful ones of God*. A recent MA thesis by Nkosinathi Sithole entitled, "Testimony, Identity and Power: Oral Narratives of Near-Death Experiences in the Nazarite Church," devoted to the miracles of Prophet Shembe and his NBC, shows the importance played by near-death experiences in the worship life of this church. For the ZCC Mr Kgaria explained, "And the priests, one by one, in fact you will find that in one church in ZCC, six to seven priests will stand up to speak. And all of them are praising the church, talking about all the miracles that happened in their lives."

There is no doubt that people will go to a church that works for them, especially a church where diseases are healed.

4 CONCLUSION

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The membership of the two largest AICs is largely made up of adults. The founding agenda of responding to white cultural domination made these churches relevant to Zulus and Pedi adults. While the churches provide indirect protection to the children of members, no specific instruction is intentionally designed to convert such children to become members until they have reached puberty. The churches have strong leanings towards orthopraxis (which brings about miraculous protection and healing) and are less interested in orthodoxy, which promises salvation. This focus on orthopraxis attracts large numbers of traditionalists because it is in keeping with their identity. By their nature, the two churches are adult churches. They address specific adult needs, such as the fear of sorcery, health matters and sexual purity. Children's needs are attended to at home by their parents. In the church services themselves, children are but 'appendages' and these churches can still operate successfully without their participation.

Being Messianic-type AICs on the one hand and nativistic on the other, it seems that the NBC and the ZCC will not find it easy to be contextual. As Messianic-type churches, the two churches will not easily digress from their founders' original practice in order to stay abreast of the times. Like other AICs who strongly uphold the dreams and visions of their founders, the NBC and the ZCC are inclined to believe that this original practice is cast in stone. As nativistic movements, the two churches owe their existence to upholding their pre-Christian Zulu and Pedi traditions, traditions which do not consider children important in spiritual matters.

Since they allow polygamous marriages, the NBC and ZCC should be commanding a larger women membership compared with that of men. One would expect women to lobby for an active role of children in the churches worship life. Women in the NBC and ZCC traditionally raise children on their own, and do not initiate change in their churches. One would expect that the revitalistic nature of the two churches to be used to alter the churches practice and create space for children's participation in public worship services. In South Africa, however, a church of adults led exclusively by men, such as the NBC and the ZCC, will not easily transform and give space to children who are mainly the responsibility of women. Linda Richter and Robert

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Morrel observed that men in South Africa tend not to be involved in raising children. In their recent publication, *BABA: Men and Fatherhood in South Africa*, they write as follows:

Not all fathers are proud to be fathers, and unfortunately not all fathers want to participate in the lives of their children. In fact, most South African men do not seem especially interested in their children. They seldom attend the births of their own, they don't always acknowledge that their children are their own, and they frequently fail to participate in their children's lives (Richter & Morrel 2005:2).

It will be interesting to compare the practice in the NBC and the ZCC with the practice of the Early Church and the pre-Reformation Church regarding the conversion and raising of children as Christians. Since Church History in southern Africa is oriented towards studying developments in the Western Church, this study could be widened by investigating the space western churches reserved for children in worship services. Although traditional churches such as catholic churches are heterogeneous, we historians have impoverished our studies by marginalising those churches that are found in Africa. In the history of the Church in South Africa, the AICs made a major contribution when they seceded from the mainline western churches owing to their yearning for a religious practice that resonated with their culture. It is in this way that they will come to realize that children have spiritual needs that require nurturing in the worship life of the church. At present, there are no pre-pubescent Nazarites and Zionists.

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in Pietermaritzburg.

Nsibande, Jabulani. Interviewed by R Ntsimane on 3 December 2005
in Piet Retief.

ENDNOTES

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- 1 Historians, anthropologists, musicians and literature students are among those who have written on the two African Initiated Churches (AICs). Although the numerical strength of these churches, are seldom mentioned by these researchers, they nevertheless concur that the NBC and the ZCC are the largest AICs in South Africa (Gunner 2005:7; Makhubu 1988:14; Morige 1995:102).
 - 2 White missionaries were significant though subtle players in the oppression of black people in the colonial South Africa. For a deeper discussion on this see Majeke's *Role of missionaries in conquest*.
 - 3 Makhubu discusses the cultural restrains of blacks in the mission churches in his book, *We the Independent Churches*.
 - 4 Bishop Colenso of the Anglican Church and Dr Johannes van der Kemp of the London Missionary Society are two examples of white men who strove to understand the worldviews of the indigenous people without imposing their religiosity on them.
 - 5 The liturgy in the mission churches and the training of the clergy are not dissimilar to those of the home churches of mission societies in the West.
 - 6 Quoting from Lessa and Vogt, Vilakazi regards Nativistic Movements under which he classifies the NBC, as any conscious, organised attempt on the part of a society's members to revive or perpetuate selected aspects of their culture, px.
 - 7 Sorcery, like sexuality and death is not spoken of in the presence of children.
 - 8 Circumcision for men and incision are the most common rites of passage in Africa.
 - 9 "Dinuzulu did not stand at the graveside because it was said that he was still a child, and would not live to adulthood. In addition, at that time he had not yet reached puberty."
 - 10 Ellis, *Communicating with the African patient*. 2004, p87.
 - 11 Quoting Wallace, Vilakazi explains revitalistic movement as a special form of the culture change phenomenon, where the persons involved must perceive their culture, or a major portion of it, as unsatisfactory and must deliberately set out to reform it, pxii.