

# THE RELEVANCE OF ORAL HISTORY AS A METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH IN CHURCH HISTORY: THE CASE OF THE ZION CHRISTIAN CHURCH

*Lazarus Lebeloane*

Department of Further Teacher Education,  
University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

*Mokhele Madise*

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

## *Abstract*

This article is intended to show how the use of oral history as a methodology can be helpful, yet may sometimes lead to distortions. Some of the information addressed in this article has already been documented, but much of it has not been given in full. The reason for this is simply that many of the African Independent Churches do not openly disclose everything about themselves. In some cases the names of the people interviewed for this article are not disclosed, for their own protection. Sometimes church leaders were present during the interview sessions to determine what should be disclosed and how. In other cases, church leaders chose who was to be interviewed and on what subject, as some information is deemed sensitive and may not be disclosed at all. It is in this context that conclusions have been drawn.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Oral history is one of the methods by which information is passed from generation to generation in any society. Many members of South African society, like many others globally, have used this method and continue to use it to pass information. The oral history which has been handed down includes that of Africa, Christianity, the church and history in general. This paper focuses on the relevance of using oral history as a research method in South African church history. That is, the crux of this article is to highlight the relevance of oral history as a research methodology in church history.

A brief background of key concepts in this paper will be provided, followed by a discussion of the relevance of oral history as a research method in South African church history. The focus will be on the procedures and processes of African Independent Churches in South Africa. Conclusions will be drawn.

## 2 KEY CONCEPTS

This section will be devoted to defining certain identified key concepts, namely oral history, church history and methods of research. These will be further defined in the context of the study.

## **2.1 Oral history**

There does not seem to be a specific definition of oral history. Different people define it differently. For the purposes of this article, however, it is defined as a process by which real incidents which could be related in the form of stories are passed from person to person or even from generation to generation by word of mouth.

## **2.2 Church history**

There does not seem to be any consensus on the definition of church history. For the purposes of this article it will be defined as the history of the church from time immemorial up to the present day. It concerns the past, looking forward to and linking up with the future. Michael Stanford (1996:10) describes history as “the experience of human life extended over time. Life as we know it is full of ups and downs, so one of the basic concepts of history is change”. Furthermore, history is about unity, action, outlook, discourse, knowledge, relics, events, sequence, and theory. It is one of those processes that influence and tailor the future of the church in any Christian society. It is history that cannot be taken away from people who have experienced those events which have, in fact, unfolded before them. Church history involves the relics, the ruins as well as the active participants, among other elements.

## **2.3 Methods of research**

Although the method of research will feature prominently in this article, it is important to outline it at the start. While research is defined differently by different sources (Mouly 1978:53; Hopkins 1980:25; Gay 1990:549; Aray, Jacobs & Razavieh 1990:23; Lebeloane 1998:21; Lebeloane 2004, it is defined for the purposes of this article as a well structured and exploratory study that uses systematic means (methods) to resolve an identified issue which warrants inquiry and to recommend new ideas. This article is descriptive (Lebeloane 1998: 21), because it draws on the literature about oral history as a research methodology in church history.

Having defined the above key concepts, we can now discuss the relevance of oral history in church history.

## **3 THE RELEVANCE OF ORAL HISTORY IN CHURCH HISTORY**

This section highlights the relevance of oral history as a research method to examine the African Independent Churches (AIC) within South Africa. There are many African Independent Churches in South Africa, but the focus in this article will be on the Zion churches.

Although there are no exact figures concerning the literacy level of members of these churches, the majority of them do not seem to be formally educated.

For example, the majority of members of the Zion churches - such as the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) - are not formally educated in terms of literacy. Most of them therefore rely on oral history as one of the means of communicating their history and that of their churches. That is, oral history is often used where no documented data exist. The identified examples cited below illustrate the relevance of using oral history in church history.

### 3.1 Revelation/vision and mission

Unlike those of many mainline churches, most of the founders of the Zion churches do not have a documented, clearly stated revelation (vision) and mission. It is the vision and mission statement that determines the position and purpose of the church. In most cases the founder seems to be the one with the revelation (vision), and it does not have to be written down for the rest of the membership to adhere to it. As for the mission, this is very simple in the Zion churches. The mission is to ensure that the gospel is transmitted by the ministers to the people (anonymous ZCC elder). The mission in which ministers are involved includes baptism, healing, exorcism of demon spirits and preaching.

### 3.2 Seating arrangements

Seating arrangements in the Zion churches are very conservative, because men and women do not always mix. These separate seating arrangements are taken very seriously by members of many Zion churches such as the ZCC. It seems to be a culture captured from the scriptural texts of the Old Testament, where male Jews do not sit with females in the synagogue. This seems to result from cultural norms, as it does in the cultural court called “kgotla” in Setswana (Motswana ZCC elder). Women are allowed to attend the cultural court but do not have a say in its deliberations, nor do they sit with the men.

### 3.3 Dress codes

On the basis of the above information, some members of the Zion Christian Church join movements such as a mothers’ union, church choir, men’s league and so on within the church. These movements have different types of uniform. The colours differ from movement to movement. For most of the Zion churches, the uniform is part their foundation as they believe it to be a revelation from God. This revelation does not seem to be documented. However, the issue with regard to uniform is basically that people wear different colours for various roles they perform in the church. These roles are seen as mission work. In other words, the revelation from God leads to mission carried out by the people in obedience to the church. For example, in the ZCC the different colours signify dress code or uniform. Among the women, some wear the royal blue dresses which mean that their mission is to participate in the church choir. Some wear khaki and green uniform. They are called the *manyano*.

Men also have their own uniform. Some put on khaki suits, shirts and ties. They participate in the men’s choir called *Mokhukhu* (Moripe 2004:14), though the term can have other meanings in different contexts. The members of Mokhukhu also wear a black cap with a silver five-pointed star on the forehead. The letters ZCC are sewn on a small strip of green baize cloth which is usually pinned to the clothes (Moripe 2004:14). The badge is regarded as a badge of honour which symbolises spirituality and the healing power one possesses. It also symbolises full membership of the church. Others put on green suits with yellow stripes. Their mission is to evangelise.

Others are prophets (ZCC elder). There seems to be little documented information as to what constitutes oral history in this area.

Apart from the roles played by people in uniform, there are norms to which church members adhere in handling the uniform. For example, no woman may under any circumstances touch, wash or iron a man's uniform. Men are responsible for washing and ironing their uniforms. Women are responsible for their own, and men may not handle these either (ZCC elder).

### **3.4 Beverages**

In the Zion Christian Church, beverages include such items as coffee, cooking oil, milk, tea, and water. They are used for various purposes in the church. For example, the ZCC uses coffee, oil and water for drinking purposes among other things. However, there are norms to which members of the church have to adhere when they prepare and drink any of those beverages. People who prepare and drink them must always dress modestly. The ZCC is patriarchal. That is why it is usually men who prepare the coffee, cooking oil, milk, tea or water. Men must put on a jacket; women must put on a hat and cover their shoulders when they drink the coffee, because it is regarded as sacred (ZCC elder). This information, which constitutes oral history, has been passed down from generation to generation.

### **3.5 Music**

The Zion Christian Church recognises the dance music called Mokhukhu. They also recognise the hymns that form part of their music in the worship services. One well-known hymn is called Mpogo. These two forms of music in the ZCC are quite distinct from each other, as we shall see.

### **3.6 Mokhukhu**

Mokhukhu is a commonly used South African term, especially among African communities. It can have various meanings, depending on the context in which it is used.

Many African South Africans understand the term Mokhukhu as meaning or referring to a shack or a tin house (my own view). To many people this shack or tin house signifies a shelter in which one can take refuge during bad weather (rain, strong wind and so on).

Mokhukhu is also a form of dance that is executed during worship in the Zion Christian Church (Moripe 2004:12). Little has been documented about Mokhukhu dance in the ZCC. This type of dance is very old in the African cultural context. Like many African established Independent Churches, which feature various actions during worship, some ZCC members use Mokhukhu in their services. Upon inquiring from some ZCC elders about the importance of Mokhukhu, the researchers were informed that it assists in deliverance from the oppression of evil spirits. It also resolves many problems in every area of human life. The fact that the ZCC is not only a place of worship, but also of healing, has made it a strong church with a large following (ZCC elder). The

main purpose of the dance is to express joy and praise in the presence of God (Moripe 2004:13).

Mokhukhu is regarded as the second-best musical activity in the Zion Christian Church after the brass band, which is under the leadership of Bishop Barnabas Lekhanyane. This act of dancing and singing was inherited from the rich culture of African lyrics, idioms and proverbs and is sometimes accompanied by poetry. According to Moripe (2004:13), singing comes naturally to the majority of Africans. They sing in times of both joy and sorrow.

Mokhukhu as a dance in the ZCC is mostly done by men who sing and jump as high as they can in a rhythmic movement. To participate in this form of dance, a man needs to be fit, because it involves a lot of jumping up and down. According to one of the church elders interviewed, the men who take part in Mokhukhu can sing and dance for a whole night.

The dance is regarded above all as a form of healing, as it penetrates into the being of a person who worships (Moripe 2004:15). It is seen as a means to relieve stress and depression. Finally, says Moripe (2004:15), its purpose is to bring participants together in joyous celebration in a religious setting.

### **3.7 Mpogo**

This is a hymn sung by everyone in the Zion Christian Church. The song is very long and can go on for two to three hours. Mpogo is a ritual prayer song which is normally sung when there are issues that need to be addressed by the church. Sometimes Mpogo is used to address problems experienced by either an individual or a family. The words of this song are simply "Mpogo" and nothing more. According to a church elder in the ZCC, this prayer song is designed to prepare the congregation for the day when a church, an individual or a family problem is to be addressed. In essence, Mpogo is meant to pray for peace and a peaceful settlement of problems. In many instances Mpogo is not confined to the church premises, as it can be sung at the homestead as well. This is a night vigil song and, as already noted, it can go on for at least two to three hours.

### **3.8 Baptism**

Baptism is an outdoor activity conducted by the priests of the church. In many instances, members are baptised in a flowing river or stream in a pond. This tradition goes back to the New Testament time when Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist in the river Jordan (John 1:24-29). It is commonly known that many Zionist-type churches among the AICs adhere to baptism by immersion. One of the significant phenomena that accompany this type of baptism in the ZCC is the power to heal by means of water. However, a lot of information about baptism by immersion in the Zionist type of churches has been well documented by many scholars.

### **3.9 Leadership**

Leadership in the church could be illustrated by way of the situation in a number of African Independent Churches. For example, Bishop P Mabiletsa founded The Christian Apostolic Church in South Africa, which was based in Alexandra Township near Johannesburg. His immediate descendants succeeded him as bishops of the same church. Succession in the leadership of the church followed a similar pattern in the St John Apostolic Church (MaNku church). The IPCC was no exception when the founder, Bishop Modise, died.

The same trend is evident in the ZCC. When the founder (Bishop Lekhanyane) died, there was a dispute regarding the succession which split the church in two. Succession is still the practice in the ZCC. From the examples cited above, it may be noted that not much has been documented. In most cases, oral history served to confirm succession. Because of this, oral history remains a relevant mechanism for conducting research into church history.

It seems to be the norm that the hierarchy of many African Independent Churches, such as the Zion churches, is restricted to the family tree. This is illustrated by the situation in the ZCC, where biological descendants have taken over the leadership after the death of the founders (*Daily Sun*, April 5, 2007). A similar pattern may be noted in the International Pentecostal Christian Church (IPCC). Bishop Modise died and was succeeded by one of his descendants. The same thing happened in the church founded by Bishop Paul Mabiletsa in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, as well as in the St John Apostolic Church founded by Ms Christinah Nku. That is, the leadership is restricted to the family of the founder. The descendants become bishops by virtue of their descent from the church founder.

In some instances, the leadership issue was clouded by conflicts between descendants of the founder. For example, leadership conflict in the ZCC resulted in the church splitting in two. Conflict over the leadership of the Shembe Church likewise led to a split of the church into two (*Daily Sun*, April 5, 2007).

### **3.10 Linkages through oral history**

Oral history facilitates linkages in the church's history. For example, Lebeloane and Madise (2004) highlighted the undocumented history of the establishment of a church school in Alexandra Township, Johannesburg, by way of linkages. That is, they linked oral history (provided by former learners and by church members) to documented information. They also gathered information on the use of different types of water in the ZCC by means of oral history (2006).

## **4 CONCLUSION**

It may be concluded that oral history is one of the relevant research methods into the way in which information is passed from generation to generation in any society. This notion was justified in the preceding sections in various ways, including definitions of the concepts in the context of the article. This

was followed by examples to illustrate the relevance of oral history and how it (oral history) could be used as a method of research into church history in South Africa.

At the same time, oral history continues to play an important part in the Zion Christian Church and other African Independent Churches. This can be seen primarily in the confidentiality that is insisted on, especially when one conducts an interview with simple, ordinary members of these churches. The common reason cited by many is that they are not authorised by the hierarchy of the church to talk about church matters, hence they always refuse to have their names mentioned in the documents. In interviews involving church authorities, it is another different matter.

Many of the church leaders do not like to be questioned in depth about what happens in the church. In many instances they prefer not to be the ones answering the questions; instead, someone else will have the task of responding in the presence of the hierarchy. Usually, in a situation like this, whoever is tasked with responding to the interviewer is told what to say and how. In a situation where the respondent thinks differently, he or she may consult either with the bishop or with the elder. On sensitive matters, usually, no information is divulged, as that would mean breaking the rule of confidentiality in the church. This implies that even the information that is documented in these interviews is not complete. There is always more to it.

## WORKS CONSULTED

- Aray, D, Jacobs, LC & Razavieh, A 1990. *Introduction to research in education*. Fourth edition. London: Hol, Rinehart & Winstont.
- Gay, L R 1990. *Education research: Competencies for analysis and application*. New York: McMillan.
- Hopkins, C D 1980. *Understanding educational research: An inquiry approach*. Columbus: Merrill.
- Lebeloane, L D M 1999. A model for an environmentally directed approach. DEd thesis. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Lebeloane, L D M 2004. The “beautification of schools” as an environmental management tool. MSc thesis. Potchefstroom: North-West University.
- Lebeloane, L D M & Madise, M J S 2003. An independent church facilitates the establishment of secondary education in South Africa: A historical account. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 29(2), 221-227.
- Lebeloane, L D M & Madise, M J S 2006. The use of different types of water in the Zion Christian Church. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 32(2), 143-152.
- Moripe, S 2004. Mokhukhu. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 30(2), 12-21.



Mouly, J G 1978. *Educational research: The art and science of investigation*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Stanford, M 1996. *A companion to the study of history*. Oxford: Blackwell.

*The Revised Standard Version Bible*. 1980. Collins.

*Daily Sun* 2007. Moria 2007. Special supplement to Daily Sun, 5 April.