

Financial resources and economic agency in the early history of the African Independent Churches

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Abstract

The article examines how money issues were handled in the Methodist, Anglican, Presbyterian and Congregational churches of South Africa when some of their most prominent indigenous ministers decided to secede in the 1880s and 1890s. Far from being financially incompetent, as suggested in the missionary literature, the first African Independent Church (AIC) leaders knew how to deal with money matters, having exercised important responsibilities in the mission churches before breaking away from them. Conflicts on the manner of managing church funds played an important role in their resolution to establish independent churches. Discrimination in respect of salaries, housing and working conditions also contributed to their sense of alienation. The breakaway churches' rapid development is testimony to the organisational capacity of their leaders.

Introduction

It is a commonplace in the missionary literature that the leaders of the African Independent Churches (AICs) were poor financial administrators. "The history of Ethiopianism in general", Johannes du Plessis, the Dutch Reformed Church's general secretary for mission, wrote in his 1911 classic study of the Christian missions in South Africa, "has made it abundantly clear that the natives are deficient in the sense of law and order, lax in their exercise of discipline, and to a large extent incapable of directing their own affairs, and, in especial, their financial affairs".¹ In a book on the "Native separatist church movement" published in 1926, Allen Lea, the general secretary of the Wesleyan Methodist Church's Missionary Society, declared that in the AICs "often the trouble arises in administration over financial matters". "It is not so much a question of bad intention and evil misuse of

¹ J. Du Plessis, *A history of Christian missions in South Africa* (facsimile reprint of the 1911 edition), Cape Town, C. Struik, 1965, 457.

money by the Native officers”, he added with a touch of paternalism, “as it is just incapacity to manage money matters. There has been no sufficiently developed financial capacity. And can we wonder? It is so recent that the Bantu first handled our coinage”.²

To Du Plessis, Lea and their likes, the early AIC leaders’ financial incapability was self-evident. But was their assessment correct? An examination of the documentation gathered for a century on the history of the AICs suggests, on the contrary, that the secessionist leaders regularly challenged the missionary bodies on the manner of managing the church funds and that these disputes played an important role in their decision to secede. The problem with the early AIC leaders was not that they were incompetent in matters of financial management. The conflict was about financial control. Many of them had received – from the missionaries themselves ironically – a fair amount of training in church management and they had exercised important responsibilities in the mission churches. They knew what they were doing when they questioned how the missionary authorities were administering the mission’s finances. And later, once in charge of their own churches, they managed their affairs rather well, considering all the obstacles they were facing.

Curiously, the economic history of the AICs, whether in the early period or in later years, has not attracted much attention from historians, anthropologists and scholars of religion even though scattered information on financial matters can be found in the ever-growing body of literature on the history of indigenous Christianity.³ The same applies *mutatis mutandis* to the finances of the mission churches.⁴ Themes such as healing and rituals, models of leadership or the relationship between religion and politics elicited a much larger amount of research.⁵

² Allen Lea, *Native Separatist Church Movement* (Cape Town: Juta, 1926), 53-54.

³ The only authors who dedicated specific studies to the economic life of the AICs are James Kiernan and Gerald Oosthuizen, but this represents only a small part of their respective works. See J. Kiernan, "Poor and Puritan: an attempt to view Zionism as a collective response to urban poverty", *African Studies* 36/1 (1977), pp. 31-41, reprinted in J. Kiernan, *The production and management of therapeutic power in Zionist churches within a Zulu city* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1970), 35-52; G.C., Oosthuizen, *African independent churches and small business: spiritual support for secular empowerment*, Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1997.

⁴ For South African examples, see Stuart Bate, "Money, the Catholic Church and settler culture in South Africa", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 26 (2000), 235-264; Humphrey Mogashoa, "South African Baptists and finance matters, 1820-1948", unpublished PhD dissertation, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2005.

⁵ For a survey, outdated but still useful, of the literature on AICs in South Africa, see James Kiernan, "The Study of African Independent Churches: Themes and Trends", *Religion in Africa*, 12 (1981), 136-147 (reprinted in J. Kiernan, *The Production and Management of Therapeutic Power in Zionist Churches within a Zulu City* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 1-14). On the history of the Independent Churches in South Africa, see also David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 115-147.

The first secessionist movements

Money matters did not play a central role in the decision made by Nehemiah Tile, one of the first black Methodist ministers ordained in South Africa, to secede from the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1883.⁶ They rather appear as a contributing factor. More significant in the context of this discussion is the fact that, before entering into conflict with his missionary superiors and establishing the Thembu National Church a year later, Tile was an able church administrator. While still a Methodist, he had increased the number of converts in several missions stations, erected a chapel in one of the mission stations and contributed to the establishment of the Umgwali School, an important educational centre.⁷ His breach with the Wesleyan Church is not well documented. He certainly felt indignant at not having been admitted into full connexion at the first Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in April 1883 despite the relatively lengthy period he had served on trial. He probably also resented the exclusion of the African members of the church from the deliberations on the distribution of funds. But the main cause of Tile leaving the Wesleyan Church, according to his biographer,⁸ lay in his political activity within the Thembu chiefdom. Well introduced at the court of the Thembu paramount chief, he spoke against hut taxes, pass laws, white settlement and the network of magistrates that enforced colonial rule over Thembuland. Rather than colonial rule, Tile and the Thembu Church demanded that Thembuland be placed under the direct rule of the British Empire.⁹

The movement of secession led by Mbiyana Ngidi, an ordained minister of the American Zulu Mission, in Zululand about 1885 had more to do with a dispute over finances than did Tile's. This was to be the pattern in nearly all the conflicts between indigenous ministers and missionary bodies in subsequent years. Ngidi, a cousin of William Ngidi, Bishop Colenso's translator and confidant, had served as a preacher and evangelist for seventeen years when he was ordained, in 1878, as pastor of the church he had founded in Noodsberg near Dalton in Natal. Later he founded a mission station in Rorke's Drift in Zululand. Like Nehemiah Tile he belonged to the very first generation of black ministers in South Africa.¹⁰

⁶ On Nehemiah Tile see C.C. Saunders, "Tile and the Thembu church: politics and independency on the Cape Eastern frontier in the late nineteenth century", *Journal of African History*, 11/4 (1970), 553-570; Daryl Balia, *Black Methodists and white supremacy in South Africa* (Durban, Madiba Publications, 1991), 52-67; Joan Millard, *Malihambe: let the Word speak* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press), 1998, 67-69.

⁷ T.D. Mweli Skota, *The African yearly register* (Johannesburg: R.L. Esson, [1931?]), 95.

⁸ Saunders, "Tile and the Thembu church", 555.

⁹ Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 114.

¹⁰ On Mbiyana Ngidi, see Lester Ernest Switzer, "The problems of an African mission in a white-dominated, multi-racial society: the American Zulu Mission in South Africa 1885-1910", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Natal, 1971, 374-376. See also W.J-M. Lulat,

In the Congregationalist tradition, one would have expected the founder and leader of a congregation to administer the finances of his church. Judson Smith, the secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, was of the same opinion, convinced as he was of the necessity to develop self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating missionary churches. The body created to oversee missionary work in Natal and Zululand, the Abaisitupa or “Six” – two missionaries and four indigenous ministers – also thought that the indigenous ministers should manage their own funds. But the white missionaries objected. It was in this context that Ngidi broke away from the American Zulu Mission to set up the Uhlanga Church, the second independent church of any importance in South African history. The nucleus of this church was formed out of the Rorke’s Drift congregation. About 1890 he returned to Noodsberg as a “bishop” and set up a rival church to the American Zulu Mission in that area as well.¹¹

Grievances over money among Ethiopian leaders

The phenomenon of secession accelerated in the 1890s, with no fewer than seven breakaway movements and a unifying social and religious ideology known as Ethiopianism. There is evidence of controversies on the management of church finances in almost all the breakaways. The secessionists belonged to the churches most active in the mission field: three were Methodists (Mangena Mokone, James Dwane and Gilead Xaba), two Anglicans (Joseph Khanyane and Samuel Brander), two Congregationalists (Fokoti and Simungu Shibe) and one Presbyterian (Mpambani Mzimba). The centre of the movement was Pretoria, but the leaders knew each other and some had studied together in Healdtown, the training centre for black Methodists in the Eastern Cape.

The first was Joseph Khanyane Napo, an evangelist of the Episcopal Mission in Pretoria, a mission of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. We do not know the reason that prompted him to secede with the majority of his flock in 1889 while his bishop was on a tour in England. All we know is that he founded the “African Church”, a body soon associated with Mokone’s Ethiopian Church.¹² Khanyane’s subsequent actions point at

United States relations with South Africa: a critical overview from the colonial period to the present (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 114-115.

¹¹ Switzer, “The problems of an African mission”, 375.

¹² Maurice Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien au sud de l’Afrique de 1896 à 1899* (Cahors: A. Couesland, 1902). Reprint with an introduction by Robert Cornevin (Paris, Académie des sciences d’outre-mer, 1976). We quote here is the second edition, 40-41. On Khanyane, see also Erhard Kamphausen, *Anfänge der kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika: Geschichte und Theologie der Athiopischen Bewegung, 1872-1912* (Bern and Frankfurt/M: Herbert Lang and Peter Lang: 1976), 121; James T. Campbell, *Songs of Zion: The African*

some financial matters. He seems to have been a rather effective administrator. His first endeavour after subdividing the Pretoria district into a dozen parishes of which he became the self-appointed bishop was to raise funds for the erection of a church. The construction of the building took three years and was entirely financed by the members of the church. The French church historian Maurice Leenhardt, who probably received his information from Paul Farmer, the head of the Anglican mission in Pretoria in the early 20th century, wrote that the construction cost 37 500 francs (£1500).¹³ The collection made on the day of the inauguration, in December 1897, produced 825 francs (£33).¹⁴ Khanyane paid himself a salary of 1250 francs (£50) which Leenhardt described as modest.¹⁵ The other pastors of the African Church were self-supporting. The 25 000 francs (£1000) necessary to complete the construction of the church had not been found by the time Leenhardt wrote his book.¹⁶

The defection of Mangena Mokone, a highly regarded Methodist pastor, and the foundation of the Ethiopian Church occurred three years later in 1892. Born in 1851, Mokone had served his church as a teacher and a preacher in Natal and in the Transvaal until he was accepted into the ministry in 1888. Passionate about the education of black people, he was one of those who recommended the establishment of Kilnerton Institute, a theological school in Pretoria. The fact that he was appointed principal of this institution in March 1891, hardly three years after his ordination, indicates how trusted he was by his superiors.¹⁷

He resigned, however, from all functions less than eighteen months later. The reason is given in a letter of grievances dated 23 October 1892 that is commonly known as the "Founder's declaration of independence".¹⁸ He was only a principal in name, he explained in the document. The church authorities ran the school over his head without even bothering to consult him.

Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States and South Africa (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 144.

¹³ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, p. 41.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁷ On Mangena Mokone's early years, the best source of information is the short biographical sketched written by his son: J.M. Mokone, *The early life of the founder* (Johannesburg, A. S. Hunt, 1935). I thank my colleague Dr S. Kumalo for giving me access to a copy of this rare pamphlet. See also Kamphausen, *Anfänge der kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 109-120; Balia, *Black Methodists and white supremacy*, 68-73; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 115-118; Millard, *Malihambe*, 65-67.

¹⁸ Mokone, *The early life of the founder*, 10-12.

As Principal of Kilnerton Institute, I was not esteemed as one who belongs to and has any say in the school. A student may be discharged, or may leave school and no one would tell me anything about it, until I hear from somebody else not in any way connected with the Institution.¹⁹

Yet, money issues played a not insignificant role in Mokone's decision to resign. Four out of the fourteen grievances dealt with financial matters. All illustrated some form of racial discrimination. Unlike their white colleagues, the black ministers did not receive an allowance for their wives and children. They received a salary of £24 to £60 per annum, considerably less than the £300 per year paid to the white ministers. Unlike those, they were not supplied with ox-wagons and furniture by the Wesleyan Society and they were forced to live in shabby houses. Mokone had to build his house at his own expense.²⁰

Mokone named the new church "Ethiopian" in reference to the Ethiopians mentioned in the Psalms and the Acts of the Apostle. Subsequently, the Abyssinian victory over the Italian army at the battle of Adowa in 1896 boosted the usage of the term as it stirred hopes that one day Africa would be independent of colonial control.²¹ The Ethiopian movement had an obvious political dimension. Its fast development created considerable anxiety in colonial and missionary circles. To a large degree, however, these fears were unfounded. As Richard Elphick pointed out, African nationalists in this period – including Ethiopian leaders – were at the same time loyal and political. AIC leaders such as Mokone and Dwane sought government recognition and made it clear that they were law-abiding citizens.²² Rather than aiming at overthrowing the colonial regime, they objected to the discriminatory laws imposed on Africans by settler legislatures.²³ As Jean Comaroff put it, "the Independent Churches did not [...] contest the structures of the colonial order; rather, they debated the place within it of the aspiring black Protestant elite".²⁴

¹⁹ "Founder's Declaration of Independence", 13, in Mokone, *The early life*, 11.

²⁰ Ibid, 4-7.

²¹ Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 56-57.

²² Badra Lahouel, "Ethiopianism and African nationalism in South Africa before 1937", *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 104 (1986), 685.

²³ Richard Elphick, "Evangelical missions and racial 'Equalization' in South Africa, 1890-1914", in Dana L. Robert (ed.), *Converting colonialism: visions and realities in mission history, 1706-1914* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 121. It is interesting to note that a century earlier, Maurice Leenhardt had reached the same conclusion in his book on the Ethiopian movement in South Africa.

²⁴ Joan Comaroff, *Body of power, spirit of resistance: the culture and history of South African people*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 176.

This brings us back to the issue of money. It was discrimination in the daily occurrences of life which was most hurtful to the Ethiopian leaders and the black congregations which followed *en bloc* their movement of secession. Differences between blacks and whites in trivial matters such as salaries, transportation, living conditions and bursaries for children fuelled the sense of alienation that made the secession of black churches possible.

The same applied to Samuel James Brander, an Anglican minister who resigned from his church in 1890 before joining the Ethiopian Church with his flock soon after its foundation in 1892.²⁵ He knew Mokone from having ministered in the same area of Pretoria. The "Constitutions and Canon of the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion", a document compiled after Brander's departure from the Ethiopian Church in 1904, state that he resigned from the Church of the Province in 1890 after a dispute over finance with Henry Brougham Bousfield, the Anglican bishop of Pretoria. Even by the standards of the time, Brander's salary was extremely low, but in addition he did not obtain the expected reimbursement for the expense of surveying the church farm. Bousfield tried to explain that the Anglican mission did not have the money to pay him a fair salary but, feeling aggrieved, Brander left. The dispute is related in the following terms in the "Constitutions":

He [Brander] was then sent to the Waterberg District as minister. His salary was £12 per annum, but at the same time he was to survey the Church farm at his own expense, and this would be refunded by the Church. At the end of the year, he looked forward to receiving his salary and a refund for his surveying expense. When he presented his account at the end of the year of 35.10.0 for the farm to Bishop Bousfield, he was given only 10/- and told that the Church was too poor to pay the amount he wanted. He went back to Waterberg District a disappointed man. On his arrival at Waterberg he wrote to the Bishop demanding for his money and he received the same reply ... As a result of this, in 1890 S.J. Brander was forced to send in his resignation from the Church of the Province.²⁶

The story of Jacob Gilead Xaba, another early recruit of the Ethiopian Church, is similar. Schooled in Edendale in Natal and Healdtown in the

²⁵ On Samuel James Brander see Kamphausen, *Anfänge der Kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 120-121; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 119-120; Millard, *Malihambe*, 9-11.

²⁶ "Constitution and canons of the Catholic church in Zion", quoted in G.Z. Lethoba, "History of the A.M.E. Church in South Africa", manuscript, n.d., quoted in Kamphausen, *Anfänge der kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 515, endnote 80. On the same incident, see Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 12, quoting a copy of the "Constitution and canons" in the Pietermaritzburg State Archives.

Eastern Cape, this Methodist evangelist had worked for a few years as a preacher and a teacher in Heilbron in the Free State when he was suspended from the Methodist Church after a dispute in 1892 with his white superintendents. The details of the conflict are not well known. According to *The Voice of Mission*, the journal of the American Methodist Episcopal Church, he had protested against the fact that the benefits of the fund for widows and orphans of ministers were reserved to white ministers.²⁷ In any event, Xaba refused to quit the pulpit and he neglected to report his suspension to the Free State authorities in order to keep the pass which allowed him to travel freely. When discovered, he was arrested and permanently dismissed from the Methodist ministry. He joined the Ethiopian Church in 1893 and was formally “re-obligated” in the Ethiopian ministry in late 1894.²⁸

A fundraiser turned dissident

The life stories of James Matta Dwane and Mpambani Mzimba are of significance to this study because both of them quit their church, the Wesleyan Methodist Church and the Free Church of Scotland respectively, in the aftermath of a fundraising trip in Europe. On each occasion a dispute arose on the manner of spending the funds collected overseas.

Three years Mokone’s senior, Dwane was born in the Transkei among the Gcaleka Xhosa where his father was a tribal counsellor. As a child he attracted the attention of a Methodist minister who baptised him, raised him as his ward and enrolled him at Healdtown Institution. After a stint as a school teacher he studied for the ministry and was ordained in Port Elizabeth in January 1881. He served in a number of parishes. That he was highly rated in the church is shown by the fact that he was chosen to train and examine black probationer ministers. In 1891 he was appointed superintendent of the Seplan Circuit in the Cala magisterial district.²⁹

Dwane’s decision to secede was the direct outcome of a fundraising tour in England in 1892 and 1893. Deeply concerned, like many Ethiopian leaders, with the educational needs of church members, he had plans for a vocational training institution in Tembuland for which he needed a starting capital of £600. After having presented his plan at the Wesleyan synod in

²⁷ *The voice of mission*, vol. 1, no 5, 1893, quoted in Kamphausen, *Anfänge der Kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 123.

²⁸ Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 122.

²⁹ On James Dwane, see T.D. Verryn, *A history of the Order of Ethiopia* (Johannesburg: Central Mission Press, 1972), 66-68; Sigqibo Dwane, "The Order of Ethiopia", in *Issues in the South African theological debate: essays and addresses in honour of the late James Matta Dwane* (Johannesburg: Skotaville, 1989, 86-101; Kamphausen, *Anfänge der Kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 137; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 123-124; Millard, *Malihambe*, 21

Queenstown in January 1892, he left for England in June 1892. Armed with reference letters from his superiors,³⁰ he visited Methodist missions in England, Wales and Ireland in which he raised 333 pounds and 4 shillings, an important sum but less than what he needed for his project. Despite the hearty welcome he received in England, it seems that he started to feel alienated there, perhaps because of the disappointing results of his fundraising tour.

But worse was to come on Dwane's return to South Africa. He expected to use the money at his disposal for the building of a black school in Tembuland, but to his surprise the Cape Town authorities of the church insisted that it should go into general funds. They also asked him to return the title deed he had taken with him to England. Distressed at having to abandon his educational scheme, he complied but announced his intention to leave the church.³¹ According to his grandson Siqqibo Dwane, racist remarks contributed to the deterioration of the atmosphere. After all, he was told, the money he had raised "had been contributed by white people".³²

In 1896 Dwane joined forces with Mokone and Brander. Because of his abilities and his forceful personality he became the leader of the newly-born Ethiopian movement.³³ His Methodist colleagues accused him of being "ambitious and discontented".³⁴ They also castigated him for having opened his superiors' letters of recommendation on the way to England, an act of indiscretion he never admitted to but which gave him a bad name far beyond the confines of the Methodist Church.³⁵

The stone church of the Lovedale native congregation

Pambani Mzimba's fundraising tour in Scotland in 1893 had a similar outcome, although not immediately. The first black Presbyterian minister ordained at Lovedale, Mzimba also was the first African from South Africa to sit in the General Assembly.³⁶ After his ordination as a minister of the Free

³⁰ Some of these letters are reproduced in Dwane, "The Order of Ethiopia", 88-90.

³¹ On this episode, see Verryn, 67-68; Kamphausen, 137-140.

³² J.D. Antoni, unpublished history of the Order of Ethiopia, quoted in Dwane, "The Order of Ethiopia", 90.

³³ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, 44-45; Sundkler, *Bantu prophets*, 40; Kamphausen, *Anfänge der kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 137-140; Campbell, *Songs of Zion*, 124.

³⁴ Lea, *Native separatist church movement*, 32.

³⁵ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, 44; Kamphausen, *Anfänge der kirchlichen Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 524-525. The incident is reported in a document of the Basel Mission Society in 1903, probably in echo to Leenhardt's bachelor's thesis published in France the previous year. See "Unabhängigkeitsbewegungen der Farbigen in Südafrika" in *Evangelisches Missions-Magazin*, vol. 47 (1903), 278-279. Reprint: Basler Missionsstudien, Heft 18. Basel, 1903.

³⁶ David Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution, 1890-1930", unpublished PhD thesis, University of Natal, 1989, 142.

Church of Scotland in 1875, Mzimba had served the Lovedale native congregation and taught at Lovedale Institution. Like Dwane and Mokone, he was held in high regard by his white colleagues for his pastoral zeal and his leadership qualities. "There is no doubt", David Burchell wrote in reference to his breakaway church, "that Mzimba benefited from the years of virtual autonomy which he had enjoyed as district minister and he was able to apply his administrative talents to good effect in difficult years ahead".³⁷ When James Henderson, the principal of Lovedale Institution, met Mzimba a decade later, in 1909, in an attempt to straighten matters out with him, his first move was to pay tribute to the secessionist leader's administrative gifts.³⁸

In 1893 Mzimba was chosen to represent the South African mission church at the Jubilee of the Free Church of Scotland. He used this opportunity to raise funds for the replacement of the old Lovedale church, which had become too small for the number of black congregants. He received a frantic welcome in the mother church and raised a handsome £1400.³⁹

In April 1898, five years after his return from Scotland, Mzimba tendered his resignation to the Presbytery of Kaffraria. His letter of resignation reveals that at that moment his relationship with James Stewart, his long-time mentor, and the other Scottish missionaries had deteriorated to a point of no return. The resignation came as a surprise as Mzimba was known for his loyalty towards the Free Church of Scotland. The first signs of discontent had appeared two years before, in 1896, after a trip to Johannesburg during which Mzimba may have been in contact with the leaders of the Ethiopian Church.⁴⁰ He was convinced, he wrote in his letter of resignation, that the missionaries and himself would "always hinder one another". They saw "things in different ways which introduce bad feelings and distrust". He had "given up all hope of an agreement with the Missionaries of the Presbytery of Kaffraria".⁴¹

In particular Mzimba resented the decision made at a Free Church synod meeting of July 1897 at which the Presbytery of Kaffraria was represented that "the Free Church native congregation at Johannesburg is fit only for a white missionary and is not fit for a native missionary".⁴² The main reason for resigning, however, was the dispute over the building of a new

³⁷ Ibid., 130.

³⁸ Ibid., 141.

³⁹ Kamphausen, *Unabhängigkeitsbewegung in Südafrika*, 299-300.

⁴⁰ Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 120.

⁴¹ University of Fort Hare (hereafter UFH): Lennox correspondence, minute book of the Presbytery of Kaffraria: Mzimba's letter of resignation, presented to Presbytery of Kaffraria, 6 April 1898, introduction and paragraph 17. See Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 122-123.

⁴² Ibid., paragraph 18.

church for the Lovedale district congregation. After a four-year delay, the funds Mzimba had raised in Scotland had finally reached the Lovedale district congregation. But the black minister and the missionaries were at loggerheads over the manner of using them. They had opposing views on the type of building which was needed and on its location.⁴³

In a book published four years after the secession Leenhardt wrote – without quoting his sources – that in his capacity as treasurer of the Presbytery Mzimba could “without raising suspicion place under his name the money [from Scotland] in a bank” and that he “withdrew it shortly afterwards and entrusted it to some friends”.⁴⁴ The missionary sources show a different story. In a memorandum compiled in July 1898, John Lennox, the missionary who oversaw the building of the church, listed among the reasons for the schism “a sense of wrong that the Foreign Mission Committee did not send the £1200 for the new church directly [to Mzimba]”.⁴⁵ James Stewart, who also had a hand in the project, confirmed, in a later writing, that the funds from Scotland had been sent to James Weir, the treasurer of the Presbytery. What the missionaries objected to was Mzimba’s determination to build an “expensive stone church” at a time when all the funds necessary for the project had not yet been raised:

The only difficulty placed by the Presbytery in the way of Mr. Mzimba’s entirely free action was their refusal to sanction his building, an expensive stone church at a cost of about £3400 when he had only £2200 in hand, and of which sum £1400 had come from Scotland. They gave sanction, however, on condition that a further £400 should be raised before he began to build. One of his great grievances was that he did not get complete control over that £1400, and that the money was remitted to the Treasurer, Mr. [James] Weir, instead of being paid to himself.⁴⁶

Leenhardt’s admittedly biased account of the dispute shows clearly that the matter in debate was the type of church the native congregation of Lovedale needed and whether the old church should be renovated or a new church building erected in a new location:

⁴³ Burchell, “A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution”, 124.

⁴⁴ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, 94-95 (my translation). I elected to translate “conseil presbytéral” as “Presbytery”.

⁴⁵ UFH, Lennox correspondence, Letter book of Presbytery of Kaffraria, 28 July 1898 to April 1904: Lennox to Lindsay, 30 July 1898. See Burchell, “A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution”, 125.

⁴⁶ James Stewart, “The case of Rev. P.J. Mzimba”, 5, quoted in Kamphausen, *Anfänge*, 586.

He then had an argument with the missionaries concerning the location of the building, which would have been convenient to change and that Mzimba wanted to leave at the same place. The missionary Lennox was asked to discuss the matter with him, and yielded to his wishes. This easy victory did not satisfy Mzimba who looked for another pretext to quarrel. He undertook repairs on such a scale that Mr Lennox refused to assume with him the responsibility of the expense and requested a meeting of the Presbytery. This meeting took place two weeks later and received the resignation of Mzimba, who kept the money and the building which had been entrusted under his care.⁴⁷

After the secession the Scottish missionaries admitted some wrongdoing in their handling of the crisis, but they minimised their responsibility. The problem, Lennox claimed in a report, was a “growing touchiness and dissatisfaction which had made Mr Mzimba suspicious and ready to find a hidden meaning in innocent and jocular remarks”.⁴⁸ While recognising that the synod decision to prefer a white missionary to a black one had been “very foolish”, WJB Moir, another missionary, felt that the disagreement over the building of the church was a “surface reason”.⁴⁹ For the missionaries the real reasons for the secession were political. Mzimba and his followers were seeking independence from white rule.

Mzimba’s letter of resignation is our only source of information on his point of view. With regard to the construction of the church, his main comment was that Stewart had said that the envisaged church was “too fine a church for natives”.⁵⁰ This brief notation helps us to put the dispute into perspective. The disagreement over the use of the funds from Scotland pointed at a bigger issue: whether the black congregations should have the same infrastructure – a church building in this case – as the white ones. The missionaries saw the problem in purely monetary terms. Mzimba probably knew as well as they did that building a stone church at Lovedale entailed a financial risk. But for him the lack of funds was not an excuse for accepting discrimination between black and white churches.

⁴⁷ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, 94-95 (my translation).

⁴⁸ UFH, Lennox correspondence, Letter book of Presbytery of Kaffraria, 28 July 1898 to April 1904: Lennox to Lindsay, 30 July 1898. See Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 125.

⁴⁹ University of Cape Town (hereafter UCT), Stewart Papers, Moir's minute book, W.J.B Moir to J. Stewart, 15 April 1898. See Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 127.

⁵⁰ UFH: Lennox correspondence, minute book of the Presbytery of Kaffaria: Mzimba's letter of resignation, paragraph 8. See Burchell, "A History of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 124.

Although it was not mentioned in Mzimba's letter of resignation, discrimination in salary between blacks and whites may have played a role in the dispute. In a report written a few months later, Elijah Makiwane, an indigenous minister who remained faithful to the Free Church, highlighted "the bad treatment which the natives were receiving from the white man, as evidenced by the salaries which the natives were receiving in all departments and the absence of promotion of those in the civil service".⁵¹

Mzimba was so bitter against the missionaries that he refused to return to them the title deeds of property to the value of £1300 which had been entrusted to him while still a minister. The matter ended at the Supreme Court in Cape Town with a ruling in favour of the Free Church of Scotland but which was not obeyed. Most of the money was never recovered.⁵²

After resigning from the Free Church of Scotland, Mzimba formed the Presbyterian Church of Africa. He took away with him a large number of adherents, all of them Mfengu and including ten elders and eleven deacons, from the Lovedale District congregation.⁵³ The movement spread rapidly. By 1904 the new church claimed a membership of 7 000 with 28 000 adherents, 425 lay preachers and 14 ordained ministers. No less than 43 churches had been erected and the movement's schools had an enrolment of 2 000. The *Scotsman*, which reported those figures,⁵⁴ did not indicate where the Presbyterian Church of Africa had found the funds to build these churches or to support these congregations and run these schools. One can presume that they came from the church members. The movement's material development is testimony to the organisational capacities of Mzimba and his followers.

Financial wrangles in the American Zulu Mission

Through an interesting coincidence the Presbyterian Church of Africa and the Zulu Congregational Church were founded in the same month – April 1898. Their histories, however, differed. Until the moment of his resignation, Mzimba was a senior pastor in the Free Church of Scotland with a wide range of pastoral responsibilities. Though he suffered from various forms of discrimination, he was part of the established church. Simungu Shibe, the founder of the Zulu Congregational Church, on the other hand, was only an approved preacher. He derived his authority from the congregation of Table Mountain near Pietermaritzburg to which the American Zulu Mission had sent him in 1887 after eight years of study at the Amanzimtoti seminary and

⁵¹ UCT, Stewart Papers, Report on the Macfarlan mission by Elijah Makiwane, July 1899. See Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 127.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 130-131. On the court case, see also Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, 94-95; Lea *The native separatist church*, 38.

⁵³ Burchell, "A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution", 117.

⁵⁴ *The Scotsman*, quoted in Burchell, A history of the Lovedale Missionary Institution, 140.

theological school. Under his leadership this small group of Kholwa had developed into a dynamic, self-supported congregation.⁵⁵ The same applied to Fokoti, the leader of a de facto independent congregation of Zulu migrant workers in Johannesburg which had put itself under the protection of the American Zulu Mission in 1892. A graduate of the theological school, he had been sent by the Mission to the Johannesburg congregation as a preacher. Like Shibe, he enjoyed the full support of his congregation.⁵⁶

Shibe and Fokoti knew each other. Both entered into conflict with a white missionary put in charge of their affairs by the American Zulu Mission. This joint experience gave birth to the Zulu Congregational Church. In both cases disputes over the financial management of the congregation played a prominent role.

In Table Mountain the problems started in April 1896 when George Pugh, a missionary appointed by the settler-dominated Pietermaritzburg Congregational Church, took charge of Shibe's congregation. Under pressure from the colonial government, the Natal Congregational Union resolved to take control of all the funds contributed by the Table Mountain community. The only stipulation in Pugh's contract was that he should use this money "for evangelistic purposes". His first move was to summarily dismiss Shibe, then on sick leave at Lovedale. The Abaisitupa, a missionary body in which the indigenous ministers were represented, reluctantly consented, but Shibe vowed to remain in Table Mountain with his congregation. Panic-stricken, the American Zulu Mission asserted its rights to the land, houses, churches and schools in the reserve and the rebel leader was tried *in absentia*. Two years later, however, after an unsuccessful appeal to the secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Shibe broke from the American Zulu Mission and established his own church.⁵⁷

Similar developments occurred in Johannesburg. In 1892 the Zulu congregation asked the American Zulu Mission to send them an African pastor, but instead they received an American missionary by the name of HD Goodenough. It was he who recruited Fokoti. He immediately set about buying a property and erecting a church with funds from the congregation. Using money inherited by his wife, he leased several properties adjacent to the church, and built a house for himself as well as an apartment building which he proposed to rent out to tenants and use the profits for mission work. This arrangement worked out for a while. The congregation established a

⁵⁵ Lester Ernest Switzer, "The problem of an African mission in a white-dominated, multi-racial society: the American Zulu Mission in South Africa 1885-1910", unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Natal, 1971, 383-384.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 377-379.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 386-389. See also Kamphausen, *Anfänge*, 350-354; Lea, *The native separatist movement*, 36. On the political aspects of Shibe's secession, see Lahouel, "Ethiopianism and African nationalism in South Africa before 1937", 685.

mission to the mine compounds, opened evening schools and started open-air meetings from which a considerable income was derived.⁵⁸

On the surface things appeared to be going well. In May 1896, however, the congregation wrote to the American Zulu Mission to complain about Goodenough's wrongdoings and ask for his recall. According to Lester Switzer, the American pastor had acquired a virtual stranglehold over the temporal and spiritual affairs of the congregation:

The most important charges against him related to the mis-handling of church property and funds and his refusal to allow the church to have its own ordained pastor. There was more than a grain of truth in both accusations. Goodenough personally controlled and allocated the various sources of church revenue together with funds accrued from his private investments. It was impossible to separate these accounts and when inquiries were made, Goodenough was tactless enough to demand complete subservience. He and the American Board controlled owned these properties and controlled the revenue. The Africans interpreted this as an acknowledgement that their money was going to Goodenough for his own private use and that they have no control whatsoever over the church property they had financed.⁵⁹

An enquiry was held but Goodenough was exonerated. He consistently refused to transfer the title deeds to the church's land to the African congregation. As the conflict deepened, the American Zulu Mission disbanded the church while authorising evangelistic activities in "mission halls". In 1897, encouraged by the support received from the Table Mountain congregation, which was faced with a similar abuse of power, Fokoti withdrew with about half of his congregation and started holding separate services. The following year he joined Shibe's Zulu Congregational Church.⁶⁰

The broken promises of the AME Church leaders

Conflicts over money did not only occur between black ministers and white missionaries. They also poisoned the relationship between the Ethiopian leaders and their African-American partners.

While on a concert tour in the United States, Mangena Mokone's great-niece, Charlotte Manye, a singer in the South African Choir, was

⁵⁸ Switzer, "The problem of an American mission", 379.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 382.

offered a scholarship at Wilberforce University by a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, a breakaway church founded in 1816 by a former Methodist preacher.⁶¹ The AME Church was already known in South Africa through its mouthpiece, *The Voice of Missions*, but it was the reading of Manye's letters which determined the newly-founded Ethiopian Church to seek contacts with its African-American counterpart. In 1896, James Dwane was sent to the United States to forge a connection. During a subsequent visit to South Africa, the AME bishop Henry Turner consecrated Dwane as auxiliary bishop, ordained sixty-five ministers and bought a site for a school in Queenstown – the very school Dwane had hoped to establish with funds collected during his tour in England in 1892.⁶²

Part of the reason for linking up with the AME Church was the desire, on the part of the Ethiopian Church, to obtain financial assistance for its own development. During his visit to South Africa in March 1898, Turner had pledged to match any amount raised by the Ethiopian Church. “The Americans”, Leenhardt reported, “committed themselves to give a sum equal to that of the Africans, that is, \$10 000 if the Africans provided \$10 000 or \$50 000 if they raised the same.”⁶³ If the claim made by Dwane at an Ethiopian meeting a year later was correct, Turner had been even more specific and promised £2 000 for the foundation of a college for preachers, teachers and health professionals in Queenstown and £200 for the building of a church in Cape Town.⁶⁴

In 1899 the Ethiopian leader made a second trip to America to raise funds for the work in South Africa and obtain full recognition as a bishop by the AME Church. Turner having failed to communicate his enthusiasm for the South African mission to his colleagues, neither goal was achieved and, soon after his return to South Africa, Dwane left the Ethiopian Church with a group of his followers and joined the Anglican Church with the permission to create, within the mission church, a semi-independent structure called the Order of Ethiopia.⁶⁵

Dwane's main reason for signing a “compact”, in August 1900, with the Anglican bishops was his desire to become a bishop.⁶⁶ This was not to happen. He was only recognised as a deacon with the title of provincial of the Order of Ethiopia. But his dream of establishing a theological school in

⁶¹ On Charlotte Manye, wife of Marshall Maxeke, see Millard, *Malihambe*, 39-41.

⁶² Sundkler, *Bantu prophets*, pp. 40-41; Chidester, *Religions of South Africa*, 118.

⁶³ Leenhardt, *Le mouvement éthiopien*, 79.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 117. See also Dwane, “The Order of Ethiopia”, 93.

⁶⁵ For a history of the Order of Ethiopia, see Trevor David Verry, *A history of the Order of Ethiopia*, Pretoria, Ecumenical Research Unit, 1972; Mandy Goedhals, “Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands to God’: the Order of Ethiopia and the Church of the Province of Southern Africa 1899-1999”, in Daniel O’Connor (ed.), *Three centuries of mission* (London, Continuum, 2000), 382-394.

⁶⁶ The text of the compact is reproduced in Verry, “A history of the Order of Ethiopia”, 90-93

Queenstown – later moved to Iqubica near King William’s Town – did not materialise. It did not take long, however, before his relationship with the Anglican missionaries started to show signs of strain. As had been the case in the Methodist Church a decade before, money played a role in the conflict. Dwane’s critic, this time, was Mr West, an English missionary who had been appointed principal of the college in 1903 in spite of his complete inexperience of Africa. At the annual conference of the Order of Ethiopia in April 1904, West spoke “strongly and in public” against the provincial’s method of keeping the books.⁶⁷ This attack, Verryn commented, drove a wedge between West and the members Order of Ethiopia:

They felt that their Provincial was being criticized unfairly, and that his honour was not being upheld. The following year, in May, West repeated his criticism, illustrating his point by contrasting an account which he had kept with one which Dwane had kept. West, also, according to members of the Order who gave evidence at the Commission of Inquiry, spoke slightly of the office of deacon (Dwane was a deacon) and alluded in public to the laxity of sexual morals amongst some Africans, and stated that the Order consisted only of Catechists and Preachers.⁶⁸

Rapidly the dispute degenerated into an open conflict. In 1909 WM Cameron, West’s predecessor as principal of the theological college and elected in the meantime bishop adjunct of the archdiocese of Cape Town, tried to heal the rift between the Anglican Church and the Order of Ethiopia by setting up a commission of enquiry. Both parts recognised their wrongs, and an agreement was reached on the matter of financial management. One of the three treasurers of the Order would be a European and all three would be appointed by the Chapter. The finances of the local mission would be administered by a “steward” and each district would have a “steward”.⁶⁹ In effect, Dwane lost control over the Order’s finances, but for him that was an acceptable compromise and peace was restored.

Dwane was not the only Ethiopian leader to feel disillusioned with the AME Church, an institution perceived as being as imperialist as the white churches in its relationship to Africans. In early 1904, Samuel Brander and a group of followers left the Ethiopian Church and their AME Church partners

⁶⁷ University of the Witwatersrand, William Cullen Library, AB 652, Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the affairs of the Order of Ethiopia, May 1909, Section G, quoted in Verryn, *A history of the Order of Ethiopia*, 119. The episode is mentioned in Skota, *The African yearly register*, 342.

⁶⁸ Verryn, *A history of the Order of Ethiopia*, 119.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 141

to form the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion, a church, interestingly, influenced by the Anglican Church's ecclesiology and liturgy. As with Dwane, money issues played a crucial role in the decision to secede, as Brander made clear in his testimony to the South African Native Commission on 4 October 1904:

We left on account of the promises they gave us when we joined them not being kept. They promised that they would give us a school from America at their own expense, with teachers and all, and this they did not do. It is now six years since we were united with them, and all those promises they failed to keep. We had to support our schools and everything here ourselves, and at the same time collect our yearly income, and also take collections for Easter Day, contingent moneys, and all that money had to be forwarded to America. When we asked for help when we were in debt, or anything, they refused to help us. I did that three times, when the Church was in danger of debt; three times I sent an application to America for them to help us, and they said they could not help us, at the same time saying we had to forward all our moneys to them. So I said it was no good for us, they would not help us from America, and it would be better for me to stay in Africa and help my people. That is my reason.⁷⁰

The Ethiopian leaders' emphasis on education signalled their unqualified adherence to modernity. In response to one of the commissioners' questions Brander explained that their aim was to raise the black people to the standards of white people. They wanted "to be allowed to buy farms outside for themselves, and to erect schools on them, whereon they could be taught industrial work". In this way, instead of "lay[ing] in the kraals" their people would be able to work and pay money for the taxes.⁷¹ Financial autonomy and income generation were at the centre of the Ethiopian project. The leaders of the first AIC churches wanted to integrate colonial society on an equal level as the European settlers.

Brander's grievances against his erstwhile American partners became part of the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion's oral tradition. The "Constitu-

⁷⁰ Testimony of the Rev. Samuel Jacobus Brander, the Rev. Joshua Mthleng Mphela and Stephen Nguato of the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion, before the South African Native Affairs Commission, 4 October 1904, in *Minutes of evidence, South African Native Affairs Commission, 1903-1905* (Cape Town: Cape Times Limited, 1905), in Thomas Karis and Gwendolin Carter, *From protest to challenge: a documentary history of African politics in South Africa, 1882-1964*, vol. 1 (Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1972), 41.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 40.

tion and Canons” of the church, a text published in Bloemfontein in 1918, accused the AME Church of having taken “like the old *Papae Romanorum* all moneys collected for the interests of the church in Africa to America, and there expended them obviously on purely American interests and not on Ethiopian interests”.⁷² The problem was not the Ethiopian Church's lack of money. It was that funds which had been raised on its behalf and therefore legitimately belonged to it had been misappropriated by the AME Church.

Conclusion

Disputes over the financial management of the church played a role in nearly all the secession movements affecting the mission churches during the last decade of the nineteenth century in South Africa. Other issues contributed to the early Ethiopian leaders' feeling of alienation, of course. They suffered discrimination because of the colour of their skin in a society deeply marked by colonial prejudice. Their salaries, their houses and their working conditions were inferior to those of the white missionaries. Like other black elites they felt excluded from political power. But what they resented most was the missionary authorities' interference in the financial management of the congregations they were serving. With time they felt they were losing control over the destiny of their churches.

In general, the black ministers who seceded from the mission churches had been held in high regard by their white superintendents. Some, like Tile, Mokone, Dwane or Mzimba, had exercised important pastoral responsibilities. It is precisely because they were experienced administrators that they felt indignant at being excluded from the financial management of their congregations. Dwane, for example, had no say on the destination of the funds he had raised in England. Mzimba, another successful fundraiser, had a dispute with the Free Church of Scotland over the manner of using the funds he had collected in Europe. Fokoti and Shibe, the recognised leaders of two self-supported American Zulu Mission congregations, were forced to surrender control to white missionaries. Even the leaders of AME Church caused disappointment among their South African followers for failing to honour their promises of financial assistance.

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⁷² *Constitutions and canons of the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion*, Bloemfontein, 1918, 6, quoted in Sundkler, *Bantu prophets*, 42.

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