NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES: 
imagery in the izibongo 
of the zulu zionist prophet, isaiah shembe

It is a characteristic of some oral art forms that they adapt to changing social and political conditions. In some cases new pressures produce a new genre, as in the case of Somali heello. In other cases the form remains the same but the content reflects and comments on the changing circumstances. In many instances oral art forms part of changing rituals which are themselves crucial cultural symbols. The izibongo (translated as 'praise-poem' or 'praises') of Isaiah Shembe, founder of the Zionist Nazareth Church, are of interest in a number of ways. Firstly they show the extension of a praise-poem to convey a new set of beliefs. Secondly they are an example of izibongo for a leader who is not royalty but who has modelled his leadership on the patterns of Zulu royalty, and thirdly the izibongo show the ability of a praise-poem to incorporate new imagery and also to capitalise on and in some cases redeploy existing images. This third point will be my main concern in this paper.

Shembe was born in 1870 and died in 1935 at which point the leadership of his Church was taken over by his son Johannes Galilee Shembe. He began his ministry at a time when the Zulus had suffered loss of power, territory and national identity. It is significant that he was baptised in 1906, a year after the Bamhatha rebellion which was a short-lived (but long-remembered) expression of anger and outrage at an alien and repressive administration. Shembe started his own Nazareth Church in 1916, three years after the Natives Land Act whereby blacks were debarred from buying land. He acquired land in reserve territory eighteen miles from Durban, and Fkuphakameni (The Exalted Place) became the centre of his Church. Here he adapted Zulu rituals
for the worship of the Nazarites, particularly for the two great festivals held in July and January. Sundkler refers to the "formative and integrative influence of the festivals" (1961, p.178). In his later Zulu Zion he refers also to the regenerative influence of the Zionist Churches (one of which was Shembe’s Nazareth Church) on their followers:

There was a new realization of selfhood and worthy identity in these men and women because of their discovery in and with Zion, of the richness and relevance of their own religions and cultural expressions. (Zulu Zion, pp.318-9)

Shembe not only adapted Zulu ritual and ceremony to the Christian worship of his Church, he also composed a series of hymns, some 222 in all, some nationalistic, some visionary. The hymns have formed the cornerstone of his followers' religious expression. They have been extensively discussed by both Sundkler (1961;1976) and Oosthuizen (The Theology of a Black Messiah, Leiden; Brill, 1967). The izibongo of Shembe have not been mentioned in studies on the prophet, yet they were regarded as an important expression of church unity by Nazarites in the east coast of Zululand where I did field work in 1976 and I was lucky to be able to find one of J.G. Shembe's bards, Azariah Mthiyane. The version I have of Isaiah Shembe's izibongo is from him. He was, he said, fifth in the line of Nazarite bards and the version he recited was a composite one with sections composed by each of the earlier bards. The Zulu praising tradition unlike the contemporary Xhosa tradition, emphasises stability and continuity in the izibongo of leaders. The Shembe izibongo therefore do not change radically at each performance; Mthiyane emphasised this by pointing out that certain lines were the composition of a particular earlier bard, and the name mentioned most frequently was that of Mdladla, the first bard of Isaiah Shembe. In a recent paper on the eighteenth century Xhosa Christian, Ntsikana, Janet Hodgson remarks that 'Any new socio-cultural development must find a mode of communicating ideas and ideals through language, as well as in ritual behaviour'. Shembe's hymns and his izibongo are a brilliant example of such communication. Other records of izibongo show the application of the traditional praise-poem to modern topics. There is for example the praise-poem by S.E.K. Mqhayi, the Xhosa 'bard of the nation' and novelist. He was commissioned to compose and perform izibongo for the Prince of Wales on his visit to South Africa in 1925 and his eulogy contained the following ironic and caustic lines:

Ah Great Britain! Great Britain! 
Great Britain of the endless sunshine ....
She sent us the preacher: she sent us the bottle,
She sent us the Bible, and barrels of brandy."

Archie Mafeje gives examples of modern Transkei politicians being verbally castigated by Xhosa bards and in another instance illus-
trates the ease with which a richly associative cattle metaphor can be used for modern political comment. The Xhosa bard is commenting on the plight of a chief exiled by the South African Government:

... up to now, nobody has made any reference to Joyi, The dark bull that is visible by its shiny horns, Horns that today are smeared with streaks of blood. It is for that reason that today he is not among us. (Mafeje, 1963, p.91)

Mathabela and Cope provide a rare example of a modern Zulu praise poem, performed for the KwaZulu Minister of Education at a Durban school's speech day. Here great play is made of the Minister's illustrious ancestry and in this example a stock martial metaphor is transferred to the classroom:

He overcame me with the spear of arithmetic, He overcame me with the spear of English, He overcame me with the spear of the Zulu Treasury, He overcame me with the spear of the deep thinker, The depth and solidarity of the Zulu Storehouse. (Mathabela and Cope, 1976 p.21)

The izibongo referred to above serve to demonstrate that praise-poetry is not imprisoned in a rhetoric binding it to a crumbled social structure and a past glory. Yet only Shembe's izibongo have attempted eulogy for a contemporary Christian leader on a scale usually reserved for Zulu royalty. With his izibongo past and present fuse in a way not found in other contemporary praises.

Shembe's izibongo are clearly the work of bards deeply familiar with the royal izibongo. There are many parallels which are obviously intentional and this is not surprising given the way in which leadership in the Nazareth Church is modelled on the Zulu kingship pattern. (Sundkler, 1961: 102, 104). The praises of Shembe are therefore in a sense 'royal'. Yet they are also very clearly the praises of a Zionist prophet and not of a Zulu king. There are clear differences where the needs of communication have forced the composers to new modes of expression and new points of reference. The parallels with the royal praises are as follows: it is essential that a bard include in his composition a number of references to places associated with the hero. In the izibongo of the kings from Shaka to Dinuzulu the place names refer largely to conquest and victories. Those in Shembe's praises list many of the places that this untiring traveller visited in the course of his ministry and instead of referring to homesteads associated with the hero the izibongo return insistently to Ekuphakameni; so much so that this holy village of the Nazarites, their earthly Zion, becomes a leitmotif of the praises moving in its associations from the earthly to the heavenly Zion.
One of the ways in which prestige and crucial lineage links are underlined in the royal praises is through the mention of early ancestors of the royal line. Thus Shaka is praised as UNodumelezi kaMenzi, He-Who-Thunders-At-Home-descendant-of-Menzi. The names of other ancestors such as Phunga, Ndaba and Mageba carry the same eulogistic connotations and help to establish the exalted aura of the royal praises. Shembe had no royal connections whatsoever, his lineage was obscure and though the names of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather are mentioned in the izibongo they would obviously carry no affective charge. The bards compensated for this by using metaphorical praise names which stress Shembe's appeal to royalty and to the chiefs while other praise names underline his support for their authority. The following praise suggests not only attraction but dependence as well:

(98)Nduku yethusi edondolozela makhos' akithi ohlunga.
  uSwazi oluncokazi
  Luyelwabonwa amakhos' akithi oSwayimani bakaziphuku.
  Bathi, 'Nanti uSwazi oluncokazi lukaThixo.

(98)The Copper Staff on which our royal leaders lean.
  Switch of many colours
  Which was seen by our chiefs Swayimani and his people
  the children of Ziphuku.  

They said, 'Here is the many-coloured switch of God'. Shembe in turn is drawn to them:

(98)Mpukane ijing' isilonde
  Wobujing' abohlanga lwendlu eSenzangakhona.

Besides setting out these indirect links with the chiefs and the royal line the bards attempt closer associations by working into Shembe's izibongo praise names already associated with one or more of the kings. For example they open and close with the praise name uGuqabadele, Kneeler-and-they-are-satisfied, a praise that is used for Cetshwayo kaMpenda but also for God. Shembe's UVemvane olunamabalabala, Butterfly-with-many-colours, echoes the butterfly praise epithets of Shaka and Dingane and the 'Copper Staff' referred to above is also a praise epithet for both Shaka and Dingane. What seems to matter in taking over such praise names is that the affective charge accompanies the praise. The precise denotative meaning of praise names is often not important; they can convey a heroic aura while they defy explanation. Innes remarks on a similar phenomenon with Mandinka praise names in the Sunjata epic: the meaning of the praise name may be opaque but its affective power for a Mandinka audience is striking.

Besides the metaphorical praise names associated with a particular king there are also metaphors which are normally confined to royalty or to people of status and examples of these
too appear in Shembe's praises. The sometimes ambiguous metaphor of the eagle - it can suggest both protection and potential destruction\(^9\) appears as a praise name for the prophet. Shembe, personified as a great protective bird, is the 'Eagle beating its wings above our own place at Ekuphakameni'. The royal image of 'the horned viper' is also used but in a specifically Nazarite way: the ferocity is balanced by love and Shembe is praised as 'Horned Viper with the compassion of his fathers'.

The praises of Shembe may have these strong and intentional echoes from the royal praise poems yet there are other techniques used which link the izibongo to the wider tradition. One of these is the inclusion of formulae in Shembe's izibongo. In Zulu praise-poems where the emphasis is on composition before performance and on memorisation the formulae serve as recognised ways of referring to character and action. Although they appear to show no metrical regularity they often exploit standard stylistic devices, and figurative language which features frequently in the formulae, adds to their aesthetic appeal.\(^10\)Shembe's qualities as inspirational leader, his courage and his great thirst for new converts are conveyed in formulae some of which are expanded so that the specific Nazarite message is clear. In two instances the bare formulae suffice. He is described as

\[(10)\text{Usambula 'nkwezane kuvel' ukukhanya,} \\
\text{Scatterer of the fog and there is light,}\
\]

and in a line first recorded in 1868 as 'a typical warrior's praise' (H. Callaway, *Nursery Tales, traditions and histories of the Zulus*, London: Trübner, 1868) he is

\[(12)\text{Umlamula 'nkunzi ungayeki zibulalane.} \\
\text{Peacemaker among the bulls instead of leaving them to kill each other.}\
\]

In another instance, the expansion significantly shifts the thrust of the single line formula by describing Shembe's evangelising ministry. The formula 'Spear red even at the haft' with its evocation of bloody combat is expanded and turned into an image of evangelism:

\[(54)\text{UCaq'elibomvu ngasekuphathweni,} \\
\text{Kuhlasele ngalo kumPukunyoni} \\
\text{Ngoba kuhlasele ngeVangeli.} \\
\text{(54)Spear red even at the haft,} \\
\text{You attacked with it at Mpukunyoni} \\
\text{Because you attacked with the Gospel.}\
\]

The themes of combat and more especially conquest provide another rich source of adaptation for the Shembe bards. Instead of listing the victims of battle, the izibongo mark off those who succumbed to his preaching, becoming members and priests of his Church. The imagery of the elements in turmoil - derived from
the fierce electrical storms of the region - has martial connotations in the royal praises, for example in those of Shaka (Cope, 1968: 92, 100). In Shembe's praises the idea of spiritual power dominates; the sky thunders and hurls down bolts of lightning to inspire and convert rather than destroy:

(129) Lidumela liphos'imbane phezu kwentaba eNhlangaazi. Lamthath' uGwabhaza kwabakaShangase, Lamshaya ngamasango esEkuphakameni. (The Sky) thundered and hurled down lightning above Nhlangakazi mountain.

It took hold of Gwabhaza of the Shangases, It struck him at the gates of Ekuphakameni.

Cattle imagery which features so prominently in the oral poetry of East and Southern Africa is a vital source of reference for composers of izibongo. Cattle play an important part in Zulu society and metaphors of bulls and calves in particular permeate the praise-poems. Yet far from becoming hackneyed as might be the case in a written tradition they continue to give aesthetic pleasure. D. Kunene (op.cit) associates cattle imagery in Zulu and Sotho praise poetry with status but in the Zulu praises they also in many cases stand for a general sense of worth and often have additional associations of strength, virility and beauty. Once again the Shembe bards exploit the metaphors for their own purpose while capitalising on their intrinsic appeal. Using the trinity of colours which dominate Zulu thought patterns the praises refer to Shembe as

(81) (IThole lakithi) eliwaba elihle ngokutshekula kwaNontand-abathakathi
(Our Calf) of black, white and red, Graceful Mover of the Place-of-the-Lover-of-wizards.11

Elsewhere he is Lunckokazi, The Many-Coloured Calf, and a little later in lines which hint at the divine qualities which some of his followers ascribe to him he is

(114) (IThole lakithi kwaNontandabathakathi
Elifihle ngamahlalahls enhla komzi kaJan Dube,12 Lithe elighamuka laselim'bal' imithathu.
(114) Our Calf of the Place-of-the-Lover-of-wizards
Which hid among the lopped-off branches at the upper end of John Dube's home. 12

Then it appeared in a trinity of colours.

In an essay attacking the emasculating effect of Christianity on African traditions Ali Mazrui13 argues that images of virility such as the bull cannot be absorbed into the new religion. Certainly there is no evidence of any such loss or emasculation in the Shembe praises. Here the prophet is at one point seen as a bull caught by a hostile crowd - a reference to resistance met
during his preaching - and elsewhere, in reference to a successful campaign, he is personified as

(138)INkunzi yakithi emdwayidwa egweb' azinye emantshebeni,
INohlasele ngelangali kwAmphukunyoni.
(138)Our Tall Bull which gores the others in the flank,  
Warrior with the Gospel at Mpukunyoni.

Not all the imagery of the prophet's izibongo is set in the aggressive and martial 'Shakan' mould (see Cope, 1968:50 and R.M. Kunene, An Analytical Survey of Zulu Poetry, University of Natal M.A. thesis, 1962:60-107) of so many of the examples cited so far. In an attempt, perhaps, to convey a different aspect of conversion and the softer aspects of Shembe's personality the bards use the metaphors of the hornbills, the heavenly messengers of traditional thought (A.I. Berglund, Zulu Thought-Patterns and Symbolism London: Hurst 1976) and a buck:

(143)I'msingiz1 zakhal' 'esangweni kwaNduli waze wavuka.
UMANxala aphande esangweni koMhlakazi waze wavuka.
(143)The Hammerheads which called out at the gate of Nduli's  
place until he awoke.  
Buck which pawed (the ground) at the gate of Mhlakazi's  
place until he awoke.

Similarly, in moving from a record of Shembe’s life to the attitudes of the Nazarites towards their leader, the imagery the bards employ is more lyrical. Examples i and ii below convey a sense of the mystical and the visionary as they express the Nazarite view of the prophet's role as intermediary at the gates of heaven (see Sundkler, 1961 pp323; 1976 pp200-201). This sense of other-worldly revelation is also present in the third example below. Here a formula line containing the metaphor of the moon is expanded to describe Shembe's risen presence returning to his old haunts and remaining protectively over the gates of Ekuphakameni. There is no precedent in earlier izibongo for the gate image which appears so frequently in Shembe's praises. Sundkler (ibid.) mentions its recurrence in the Shembe hymns and its importance in all Zionist dream life. In the praises the gates symbolise entry into a new mode of existence, acceptance by a greater being and protection from the dangers and evils of what lies outside. The use of this key Zionist symbol underlines the visionary dimension in the Shembe izibongo which so distinguishes them both from the royal praise-poems and from other contemporary izibongo.

Example i
(133)UPhuhlu njeng' ikhowe emasangweni asEkuphakameni.
Sudden springer-up like a mushroom at the gates of  
Ekuphakameni.

Examples ii and iii
(105)UMqhibuka njeng' ichanga
Oghibuka ngaphakathi ngamasanga asEkuphakameni.
Inyanga bath'ifile kanti basho nje iduke emafini.
Ugudlagudla i'ntaba zomkhambathi.
Uthe ngimbona eshona ngaleziya 'zintaba zakwamadladla.
Uthi namhlanje unempilo eside simbona.
Waseqhamuka esekhazisula esekhopha ngaphakathi kwamasango
aseEkuphakameni.

(105) Sudden Blossomer like a pumpkin
Bursting into flower inside the gates of Ekuphakameni.
Moon which they said had died but it was only wandering
in the clouds.
He skirted the mountains of Mkhambathi
And then I saw him disappearing in the direction of those
far off hills.
Even today he is alive and we behold him constantly.
He appeared shining, dazzling the eyes, within the gates of
Ekuphakameni.

The way in which the Shembe izibongo resemble and yet differ
sharply from the royal praises is also evident in the centripetal
and centrifugal tensions contained within them. On the one hand
they, like the nineteenth-century royal praises (but unlike the
more muted royal praises of Solomon kaDinuzulu d.1933) are
intensely nationalistic. They deliberately stress the distinctive­
ly Zulu nature of Shembe's Church. Whereas other churchmen are
shown worrying over doctrinal niceties:

(26) Baphenya amadastamente namaBhayibheli abavumela,
Athi, 'Kubhaliwe kanjalo !'
(26) They brandished their Testaments and their Bibles in
unison saying, 'It was written thus !'

Shembe's Zulu separatism is applauded:
(28) UHlamuka simuke siye kithi kwelakwaZulu,
Ngoba uhlamuka ngevangeli,
(28) Breaker-Away, let us leave and let us head for our own
Zululand,
Because he broke away with the Gospel.

And in a striking compound metaphor which plays on the double
meaning of 'Zulu' i.e. (a) 'the heavens' and (b) 'the Zulu people',
the exclusive nature of Shembe as a Zulu prophet is expressed:

(70) ISihlahla esihle somdlebe engasihlalwa 'zinyoni,
Siyasehlalwa 'zinyoni zeZulu.
(70) Beautiful Euphorbia Bush on which no (ordinary) birds perch
It is a perch for the birds of the Zulu.

Yet the praises also touch upon the universality of Christianity.
They chronicle Shembe's incessant travelling not only in Zululand
and Natal but to the Transkai and mention is made of a hoped-for
journey to the territory of 'Mzilikazi of Mashobane' in present­
day Zimbabwe. In lines which stress the supra-national message
of Christianity he is praised as

(135)The Star which brought light to the darkness,
It enlightened all nations beneath the sun.
(135)Inkangezi ekhanyise emnyameni
Yakhanyisela zonk' izizwe phansi komthunzi welanga.

Gerard (Four African Literatures: Xhosa, Sotho, Zulu, Amharic, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971: 184) refers to Shembe's hymns as a phenomenon of transition from oral to written literature. The izibongo represent a different kind of transition in that they show bards working in the oral mode and using an established poetic genre to express new concepts and new ideals. Shembe's praises are therefore both conservative and profoundly innovative. It is perhaps significant that these izibongo which are still performed for Shembe's successors were for the most part composed at a time when the Zulu kingship was weak. Certainly the praises of Solomon kaDinuzulu (Isaiah Shembe's royal contemporary) do not bear comparison with the prophet's izibongo either in the richness of their language or the boldness of their vision. Although they are in one sense an important religious statement Shembe's izibongo can also be seen as serving a function sometimes ascribed to epic: they create a sense of national consciousness, pride and purpose at a time of national crisis and weakness. In their nationalism and their continued success as a vehicle of cultural and religious identity the izibongo demonstrate how an oral art form can exploit the past and maintain its relevance to the present.

NOTES


of York, September 1981.


6. Line references are to the 156-line version recited by and checked with Azariah Mthiyane of Emkayideni, Richards Bay, May-August 1976. My thanks also to Thandiwe Mngadi for checking the transcriptions and translations at the University of Zululand, Ngoye in 1976.


10. See Gunner, 'Wand or Walking Stick?: the formula and its use in Zulu praise-poems', in Okpewho op.cit.

11. One of Shembe's houses at Ekuphakameni. He is said to have converted and therefore loved many wizards.

12. The Zulu writer and politician who was also Shembe's biographer and neighbour. See note 2.


14. The Nazareth Church has now split into two sections following a succession dispute after the death of Johannes Galilee (J.G.) Shembe in 1977.