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NEW WINE IN OLD BOTTLES:
IMAGERY IN THE IZIBONGO
OF THE ZULU ZIONIST PROPHET, ISAIAH SHEMEBE

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.¹ 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 Bambatha rebellion which was a short-lived (but long-remembered) expression of anger and outrage at an alien and repressive administration.² 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 Ekuphakameni (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,³ 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'.⁴ 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.⁵

Archie Mafeje⁵ 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 Cope⁵ 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 *UNodumehlezi 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 ohlanga.*
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.⁶
 They said, 'Here is the many-coloured switch of God'.
 Shembe in turn is drawn to them:

(38) *IMpukane ijing' isilonda*
Wobujing' abohlanga lwendlu eSenzangakhona.
 (38) Fly which pesters a sore
 As it pestered the royal line of Senzangakhona.

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 *uGugabadele*, Kneeler-and-they-are-satisfied, a praise that is used for Cetshwayo kaMpande 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.⁷ 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.⁸

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 destruction⁹ 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) *Usambula 'nkwezane kuvel' ukukhanya,*
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) *Umlamula 'nkunzi ungayeki zibulalane.*
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) *UGaq'elibomvu ngasekuphathweni,*
Kuhlasele ngalo kuMpukunyoni
Ngoba kuhlasele ngeVangeli.
(54) Spear red even at the haft,
You attacked with it at Mpukunyoni
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.*

(129) (The Sky) thundered and hurled down lightning above
Nhlankakazi 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 *Luncokazi*, 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 ngamahlaha enhla komuzi kaJan Dube,¹²
Lithe eliqhamuka 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' ezinye emantshwebeni,
INohlasela ngeVangeli kwaMpukunyoni.*

(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'nsingizi zakhal' esangweni kwaNduli waze wavuka.*

UMaxala 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' ithanga*

Oqhibuka 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 esekhazimula esexhophha ngaphakathi kwamasango
asEkuphakameni.*

- (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 distinctively 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 Transkei 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)INKanyezi 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 successors¹⁴ 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 prophets' *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

1. See Abner Cohen, 'Political Symbolism', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 8, 1979, pp. 87-113.
2. See S. Marks, *Reluctant Rebellion*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970. The sources for details of Shembe's is John Dube, *UShembe*, Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter 1936; for an illuminating interpretation of Shembe as a Zionist leader and a great poet see Bengt Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1961 (2nd ed.), also, B. Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, Uppsala: Gleerups with Oxford University Press 1976.
3. See A.T. Cope, *Izibongo: Zulu Praise-Poems*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968, especially pp. 27-38; J. Opland, 'Praise Poems as Historical Sources', in C. Saunders and R. Derricourt, eds., *Beyond the Cape Frontier*, London: Longman 1974, pp. 1-37; and J. Opland, 'Imbongi nezibongo: The Xhosa Tribal Poet and the Contemporary Poetic Tradition', *P.M.L.A.*, Vol. 90, 1975, pp.185-208.
4. Janet Hodgson, 'The Genius of Ntsikana', paper read at a conference on Literature and Society in Southern Africa, University

of York, September 1981.

5. See A.C. Jordan, *Towards an African Literature; the Emergence of Literary Form in Xhosa*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1973; A. Mafeje, 'A Chief Visits Town', *Journal of Local Administration Overseas*, 2, 1963, pp.88-99. Also Mafeje, 'The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community', *Journal of African Languages*, IV, 3, 1967, pp. 193-223. E. Mathabela and A.T. Cope, 'Sabela Zulu: A Zulu Praise-poem', *Theoria*, 46, 1976, pp. 17-25. An early example of Zulu *izibongo* for a contemporary figure is the praise-poem for Harriet Colenso composed by Mboza Matshiwulwana, one-time bard of the Hlubi chief Langalibalele. See Alice Werner's translation in *Ilanga laseNatal*, May 31, 1907.

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.

7. See Cope, 1968, p95 and D. Rycroft and A.B. Ngcobo, Unpublished transcription of the *izibongo* of Dingane kaSenzangakhona recorded by James Stuart, Zonophone 4176, 1927.

8. G. Innes, 'Formulae in Mandinka Epic: their affective function', in *The Oral Performance in Africa*, ed. I. Okpewho, Ibadan and London: Ibadan University Press and Longman, forthcoming 1983.

9. See D. Kunene, 'Metaphor and Symbolism in the Heroic Poetry of Southern Africa', in *African Folklore*, ed. R. Dorson, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, pp.295-318.

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.

13. A. Mazrui, 'Phallic Symbols in Politics and War: an African Perspective', *Journal of African Studies*, Vol.1, part 1 (1974) pp. 40-69.

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.