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13 - 15 JULY 1994

UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

HISTORY WORKSHOP

NAZARITE WOMEN, RITUAL PERFORMANCE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL TRUTH AND POWER

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Wits History Workshop

University of the Witwatersrand

July 13-16, 1994.

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Abstract

Drawing on Foucault's concept of the genealogy of knowledge, this paper explores the ritualized performances of song, prayer, and dream/miracle narratives as strategies for truth-claiming and empowerment amongst the female members of one of South Africa's oldest indigenous religious groups. These are the followers of Shembe who are also collectively known as ibandla lamaNazaretha. Denied access to the centres of economic and political power in South Africa, I argue that such discourses constitute mechanisms for the reconstitution of community and the formulation of an ideal social order. This is a state of alterity which is constructed through the religious metaphor of ekuphakameni (the elevated place or "heaven"). The Nazarite social order constitutes an essentially moral rather than political economy, founded on principles of respect, collective participation in ritualized performances of prayer, sacred song and dance, and the reciprocal exchange of dream/miracle narratives. Such performances embody

the Nazarite construction of truth and power, and are ascribed value by means of a currency of pain and suffering. They constitute one lens for the examination of popular conceptions of cultural truth and power in the histories of South Africa's peoples.

Introduction

My focus on the discourses of both religious performance or expressive culture, and of non English-speaking South African women falls into the category of what Foucault calls the genealogy of "subjugated knowledges" (Foucault 1980 [1972]:81). I use Foucault's second definition of this concept. He explains it as the

> whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified [by scientists] as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated....these low-ranking knowledges...involve..a popular knowledge...it is far from being a general commonsense knowledge, but is on the contrary a particular, local, regional knowledge (ibid.:82).

Located on the peripheries of the broader political economy, these forms of knowledge constitute an effective critique of the centralizing power of western scientific discourses. Such critique fosters an emancipation of what are essentially historical discourses from the subjection of scientific selection and exclusion, and from the coercion of a "theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse" (ibid.:85). This kind of emancipation is the function of the genealogy of knowledge.

Foucault's genealogy of knowledge sets out to examine the discourses of the marginalized others, and to consider the more elusive non-economic bases of political power. He outlines the traditional constitution of political power as it is located in the centre of society. Foucault defines such power as the "relations of force" which are manifest either as a social contract (the limits of which are oppression), or as the effect of war and repression. The first case presents

the juridical battle between the legitimate and illegitimate, and the second embodies an ongoing relationship of domination and subordination.

Ultimately however, Foucault suggests that political power is not to be studied only in terms of its legal dimensions, as it is constituted at the centre of society. Rather, he argues that power should be examined at those points furthest from the centre--at the extremities--in its local and regional, and I suggest, gendered forms and institutions. This notion of power should be considered in the ways in which it both subjects individuals but also constitutes its subjects. Such power is never a single commodity, neither is it manifest other than in action and interaction between people. An individual is therefore both the effect of power, and the means of its articulation. The specific nature of power in each instance may vary.

In this paper, I examine Nazarite women's religious discourse and performance as mechanisms for the articulation of both the effects of political and gendered power upon individual women, and the articulation of power through the construction of a regime of religious truth. This truth is constituted from a common stock of cultural metaphors and symbols, as well as experiences of bodily violation, illness, and social fragmentation. It is articulated in culturally valued forms of expressive culture--song, prayer, and dream/miracle narratives. Its central currency is the pain and hardship experienced by Nazarite members as a result of forces of the state which impinge upon the lives of the socially marginalized. In this moral currency, there are two sides to the coin of marginalization--the first is pain; the second is the triumph over such experience through miraculous or dream encounters with the Nazarite God, Shembe. These experiences form the substance of the performance of Nazarite narratives.

Nazarite expressive forms become empowering media through the reciprocal exchange

of narratives and the collective performances of dance and song, all of which serve to unite the social body in religious spaces. Central to this essay, is the thesis that such traditionally constituted expressive media have been crucial to individual and collective empowerment in this community, because economic and political empowerment in the more usual sense was increasingly denied by the state to these people. Nazarite members have used traditional cultural forms which were viewed by the state as backward, primitive, uncivilised, and therefore posed no threat to the functioning of the larger South African political economy (Spiegel and Boonzaier 1989 [1988]:41). For the Nazarites, traditional culture was a medium for the encoding of historical memory which was less subject to state surveillance and seizure when veiled in tradition, than with many other forms of popular media. In this sense, Nazarite narratives became both "historicizing discourses" (Seremetakis 1991), and the forms which enabled the imaginary construction of a state of alterity, an ideal social order, a metaphorical "heaven."

Nazarite Women in the History of Ibandla LamaNazaretha

Isaiah Shembe, the Nazarite Prophet, founded ibandla lamaNazaretha (the Church of the Nazarites) in about 1915, in the then Native Reserve of Inanda, which lies northeast of the city of Durban. Until his death in 1935, he continued to acquire various tracts of land in Natal and Zululand on which he allowed his followers to settle. The majority of his early membership--some estimate up to 95%--were women and children. They were for the most part, the socially marginalized and economically destitute--widows, orphans, and those who did not wish to engage in customary Nguni marriages.

The male-female ratio in church membership is now more evenly divided, with the male

membership assuming the majority of public positions of authority. The female membership which includes both the young virgin girls and married or widowed women, have however continued to play a central role in the daily and ritual life of ibandla lamaNazaretha. To this end, young virgin girls encompass the apex of Nazarite ritual purity, and the well-being of the community as a whole is believed to be dependent upon the retention of their virginity. There are two separate Nazarite annual rituals to celebrate the physical purity of young Nazarite girls--one in July, and one in September. For married women, defiled by sexual intercourse, this stress on female virginity as the symbol of ritual purity is further emphasized through the Biblical parable of the bridegroom and the ten virgins (Matthew 25). This text forms the basis of hymn 229 in the Nazarite hymnal which was composed by Galilee Shembe, the younger son of Isaiah, and leader of the church from 1936-1976.

Early archival records suggest that one of the aspects of Shembe's religious group which attracted young girls to his following, was the series of festivals (and special attire for these festivals) that were initiated by Shembe. In addition, from the earliest days, personal testimonies of young and old bear witness to the remarkable healing powers of the prophet for his people. The land base provided by Isaiah for his followers also gave single women in particular, the opportunity to create a measure of economic independence and self-sufficiency away from both the traditional homestead economy, and the illicit beer-brewing, laundry, domestic service or prosititon which characterized the economic possibilities for black women in the urban areas at this time.

Nazarite Narratives

An integral element of Nazarite religious ritual is the telling of stories about what Shembe has done for individual members. These stories constitute the "sermon" told by men in Sabbath worship, and by women in the monthly meetings held through the nights of the 13th and 14th of each month for married women exclusively. Such sermons encapsulate the regime of cultural truth constructed by Shembe and his followers throughout this century. They are the physical proof of the inordinate powers of their God, Shembe, who is able to provide healing for the sick, fertility to the barren, economic resources to the materially destitute, and in his mediation with the ancestors, reunites family members lost in warfare, migrant labor, and other misfortune. Shembe's cosmological powers are frequently contrasted with the inability of both western/European and precolonial/traditional institutions to provide the necessary restitution of the individual or social body.

The collective store of narratives which attest to the powers of Shembe in the lives of individual members embody one of the few resources of empowerment on earth. In this sense they constitute the accumulation of moral capital, rather than material or political excess. For the most marginalized of men and women who live in a political economy in which there is no guarantee of material gain or reciprocal return in any shape, cosmological treasure in the form of miracles, dreams, sacred song and dance has become the single means to individual and collective empowerment.

Women's Narratives

The materials used in this section are drawn from a considerable reserve of Nazarite women's narratives gathered while pursuing a fairly intensive field reserach project with the religious community, in both KwaZulu/Natal and Soweto. I spent about eighteen months with ibandla lamaNazaretha. The first eight months I stayed with the young virgin girls exclusively; and thereafter began to work more with the married women members. Young virgin girls do not perform these narratives at all, although their older counterparts--the spinsters--in the community certainly preach to the younger girls at collective rituals. Thus, these stories have been told by married women either to me through informal conversations, or to other members in the all-night women's meetings known as amaforteenies--they meet through the nights of the thirteenth and fourteenth of every month. Each women is required to stand up and preach her sermon. In so doing she is believed to "write her name in the Book of Life." It is this Book that will be consulted when she reaches the gates of heaven after death.

The narratives I have selected for this paper have been chosen in order to demonstrate Foucault's dual conceptualization of power as it is located in the peripheries. In this sense, it is both about the effects of centralized state power on the lives of individuals, and the articulation of a particular notion of personal and collective power by the politically marginalized. A subtext running through each narrative is the formulation of Nazarite alterity--the ideal social order called ekuphakameni or heaven. This will be discussed in the context of each narrative.

In these accounts, it is a Nazarite woman, either the storyteller herself or someone she knows, who becomes the subject of the account. She is the carrier of a particular strand of

collective Nazarite history. Her intense subjectivity is a central part of the telling of history, for the constructing of cultural truth--the narration of Nazarite history--is an individually constituted experience of the passage of time, and the impingement of political and economic forces beyond the control of each single narrator. Unlike the foundations of knowledge in the European philosophical tradition, in the Nazarite religious epistemology cultural truth is created out of the webs of personal experience rather than through the western notion of "objective fact." That an individual has seen or heard--has physically experienced--an event or set of circumstances is sufficient evidence of historical and cultural truth. The narrative then becomes the externalization, the objective form of subjective experience.

This stress upon personal experience locates all historical memory in the physical body. The individual and social bodies become the archives for the gathering of historical data. In many of the narratives I have collected,[1] the physical body is the medium through which the effects of historical, political, economic, and social marginalization are transmuted. It is the "sick" or "barren" body, the body in pain, that provides evidence of the fragmentation of social order, the destruction of family life, the loss of economic viability, and the material and bodily theft against so many of the women who place their hope in their God, Shembe. Because most of the older Nazarite women have had minimal schooling and are at most only partially literate, such an approach to knowledge and the construction of historical evidence is probably attributable to the minimal exposure to western education and epistemology.

With minimal editing, I have inserted the narratives in full and not relegated them to a set of appendices at the end of the paper. I have done so, because while these texts do not constitute the substance of the scholarly canon, they encapsulate their own aesthetic merit and

historical truths. They are personalized versions which function as metacommentaries of the collective experiences of millions of women who have lived and will continue to live on the margins not only of the South African political economy, but increasingly on the peripheries of the global economy. In some sense, they contain a minute element of the kinds of evidence which is currently being sought by the "truth commission" instituted in South Africa on June 7, 1994.

There are three narratives I have selected for this paper. The first is a miracle narrative that illustrates the effects of economic marginalization on the life of one black woman, how she manages the incumbent anxiety, and then explains the transformation of a situation of material lack to one of material gain. This narrative was told to me by one of the leaders of the married women. Her name is Cinikile Mazibuko, and she lives in Dube, Soweto. She recalled:

> After standing up, she told us that one day she had no money. No money to give her children to carry to school. Even her husband hasn't got money. She had only a ticket to go to work. Her husband used to collect her from work to home. That day, her husband came late to collect her.
>
> During the day she [had] failed to get money because even when she went to the bank, they didn't give her money...On their way home, they were not talking to each other because they haven't got money. You know, she said, on the highway next to Diepkloof, the traffic cop passed them. He was running at high speed. He passed them.
>
> Then she saw something like papers coming away from the scooter. Then this lady said, "What is this?" She tried to pick out of the..look at..what was it? What was falling out from the traffic cop? The traffic cop didn't wait. He just passed.
>
> Then she asked her husband to stop the car. The husband stopped the car, and they got out. Those that were coming out of the scooter was the money. It was in fifties! Fifty papers! They picked those--she didn't say how much. But, she said, it just went away from the scooter like papers. They, they picked it. The husband was picking, she also was picking.
>
> That's how Shembe helped them, because she said that if it was not because of Shembe, she was not going to get that money. But, because of Shembe...She asked him,

"Shembe, can you help me? Because I have got no money." Then Shembe put the money to this traffic cop, then blew it away. So they got the money.

Mrs. Mazibuko's narrative provides poignant commentary on the interaction between Foucault's dual conceptualization of power as it is constituted at the margins. The effects of the power of the state on individual lives is articulated at several moments in the narrative. The most obvious example is the simple lack of money--the possibility of inadequate income--even though both the woman and her husband were employed. The twist in the narrative however, is located with the traffic cop--the representative of the state--who unwittingly sends fifty rand notes to the couple. In other words, the man who usually takes money from people who travel too fast, is seen to be going at high speed. His contravention of public rule causes a reversal of everyday practice--for it is now the traffic cop who sends the money to these two individuals. This is a remarkable example of poetic transformation of fragmentation, the lack of reciprocal exchange either monetarily or verbally, and the poetic reconstitution of justice for all.

The exigesis in the last paragraph articulates Foucault's second notion of power on the peripheries. In the Nazarite understanding, the transformation of everyday practice into a context of disadvantage and economic need to one of advantage and material gain, is attributed to the miraculous. This is embodied in the cosmological power of Shembe, who is accessible only to those who believe in the power of the Nazarite God. He reigns over an Other notion of space and time, an ideal social order or heaven.

The second narrative illustrates the means by which heavenly space, time, and social order is integrated into earthly space. It was told by a woman at one of the married women's meetings, held on the night of 13 March, 1992, at a Nazarite sacred space on the Natal south coast. The site is called Vula Masango (open the gate). She recalled:

There has been violence in Umkomazi. That's where I live. No one was able to stop that violence. Only Shembe could because he wanted to show that he is great. But even then people didn't recognize him. Shembe the prophet [i.e. Isaiah] appeared to a certain woman of Umkomazi. And when he appeared to her, she wasn't sleeping. It was four o'clock in the morning. That was the time when she would wake up to do her morning prayers. She had just woken up. She saw Shembe singing the song she had just sung--song number 129.

[Do not delay me,
You who are my enemy;
When Jehovah calls me,
I must move and follow him.

Thunderstorms come out of season
In the heart that is guilty;
Hope has been dispelled,
Only anxiety remains.

It is not of their will
That they do not come to the Lord;
They have lost hope,
And their love has vanished.

Whose [child] am I?
Today Lord
The conscience of my heart
Has denounced me before you.][3]

She continued:

The prophet sang this song. And when he was in the middle of this song, the woman saw him changing as if he were the present Shembe [i.e. Amos]. When he had just finished the song, he said, "Today I have come to put an end to this violence in this area."

Good people, in the same week delegates from Ulundi came to settle the dispute in our area. Because violence was too high, we couldn't stay in our homes. But, when Shembe came, and the delegates came, we went back to our homes after many years of not staying in our homes. I don't know how we can thank Shembe for what he does, because there are so many great things that he does. (Translation assistance by Khethiwe Mthethwa.)

In this narrative the intervention of cosmological power through the appearance of

Shembe to the woman, occurs by means of the expressive media of a vision, song performance, and prayer. More specifically, it is in speaking the Words of God, by saying the morning liturgy and singing a sacred song, that the woman from Umkomazi extracts the power required to intervene in the historical moment. This power is embodied in the visionary figure of Amos Shembe, who promises to take care of the violence which has ravaged her community. The strength of Shembe's cosmological force lies in the physical evidence of violence which abated soon after his promise to resolve the matter. Furthermore, there was a changing of images from Isaiah the prophet, to Amos the present leader, because intervention involved mediation by living political leaders who would have been known only to Amos, and not to his father who died in 1935.[3]

The second aspect of this narrative is the principle of reciprocity that is reinserted into relationships between the living and the heavenly through the medium of song performance. The woman sings the words of her God, Shembe, and immediately thereafter, he appears to her singing the same song. There is a principle of reciprocal giving. The song becomes the medium of cosmological empowerment and exchange.

The third narrative outlines one further dimension to the space of alterity, the ideal social order and the sense of community which is continually created and reconstituted in the religious imaginary of Nazarite women. The story is about the way in which Shembe healed one woman's infertility. The narrative was told to me, in two slightly different versions, by two sisters. The one was Cinikile Mazibuko (mentioned above) and the other was her older sister Makhosazane Nyadi who also lives in Soweto. Cinikile began:

My mother said when she was umkhoti or newly-wed, she used to get children and the children used to die. Maybe when the child is six months, less than a year, the child dies. Now, here were six children dying.
They came in Nhlangakaze [the Nazarite holy mountain], the very same Nhlangakaze that it was in 1937 when my mother came her, to this Nhlangakaze. Whe [s]he came here, [s]he says there were them [izimbongi], as you always here shouting--people must do this and this--you see. So she said, they were here. Then somebody came and said, "Shembe says that all those who are here, who want children, must come up to him on the mountain."

So my mother went up with the other women who didn't have children. Up to where Shembe was going to pray for them. They all went up. My mother said [that] then Shembe came and said, "People must be ready." They must pray, you see. You see, as we pray, we close our eyes. My mothers says [that] as [s]he was closing her eyes, [s]he heard Shembe coming.

In her vision, my mother [s]he saw that Shembe had a basket. In the basket there was something like stars. [S]he said Shembe was taking the stars like this,. [and] he was throwing the stars like that. [S]he said some other stars too, were coming to my mother. [S]he said she just took them out [like] this, and do like this to hold the stars. The stars were just flying too. But the stars were jumping from one woman to the other women. Not everybody was getting these stars. But, to my mother, those stars came.

She said that she just put out the dress to hold the stars. The stars came. Then [he] was just praying for them, that "God, I am just praying for them, I am just asking that you please help this person, this poor woman to please get children." Like that [he] was praying, praying that side [i.e. in heaven]. "Amen." When Shembe said, "Amen," my mother was holding like this, because she saw that vision of the stars in the basket that Shembe was giving the people.

When my mother came down from the mountain, here to the dokoda,[4] she was here with, she came with her mother. She said, "Mother, you know, I saw this vision up there. I saw Shembe had a basket full of stars, and he was throwing stars to everybody. The stars were jumping, going from [one] to [the] others, and the other stars came to me, and I just held them like this." Then my mother said, "My child, you are really going to get children. When Shembe has prayed for you, and you've seen that, you really are going to get children."

Makhosazane completed the story. She recalled:

When my mother is sleeping, she had a feeling at the back, a pain. She asked the other women, "Just look at the back. What's going on with my back? There is something." You know when you get burnt, maybe it was hot water--it was something like that. My mother was crying, and the other followers--women of Shembe--said, "No, you must not

cry. It is the way Shembe is healing you." My mother said, "Whooo, how can that be?"

Then my mother went home. When she was at home, she got pregnant. One day she was sleeping and she heard somebody telling her, "I am Shembe. I am bringing you children. Your first-born will be a girl. Her name will be Makhosazane [Princess]." I am Makhosazane now.

Infertility and infant mortality are perhaps the most common sources of emotional pain discussed by Nazarite women in the narratives. The seemingly high proportion of infertility points to the manner in which the fragmentation of the social order, the subsequent loss of community and traditional beliefs have been etched upon the female body. In this regard, the inability to conceive children represents the incapacity of men and women to engage in social reproduction. It presents a striking witness to the deep sense of social and personal loss reflected in the malfunctioning of the natural mechanisms which ensure the continuity of social life and community through generations.

In this narrative such infertility and the inordinately high degree of infant mortality are contained once the ancestral realm has been reintegrated into beliefs about the process of conception. The narrated event took place in 1937, two years after the death of Isaiah Shembe, by which time he would have been firmly associated with the ancestral domain. The narrative revolves around the meeting of women at the apex of the mountain--the pinnacle of ritual purity and holiness--with [Isaiah] Shembe. The healing of infertility while on the mountain is significant because no sexual intercourse between any two people is allowed on this space.

Shembe's appearance was heard by the woman who then saw him in a vision. He was holding a basket--an artifact traditionally made and exchanged by women--and from the basket, he threw out stars. She caught the stars in her dress and later felt a pain, an excruciating

sensation of heat in her lower back. This was interpreted as the sign that healing had taken place. Both the stars--as the elements of the heavens sent to those on the earth--and the heat constituted cosmological substance. They embodied the power of the ancestors. In traditional Zulu thought the concept of heat is associated with sexual intercourse and the ancestors, and therefore, the conception of children (Berglund 1979:253-4).

The individual narrative thus becomes emblematic of the desires of many, a metacommentary on a historically constituted contest over the salient signs and symbols of everyday life (Comaroff 1985). It is deeply embedded in the colonial narrative, the battle fought in the hearts and minds of black South Africans against what Jean and John Comaroff (1991) term the "colonization of consciousness" by the forces of European and American imperialism, particularly in the form of the Christian mission. The narrative reclaims the ancestors and their interaction with the domain of everyday reality. It relocates the precolonial or traditional belief system--in which it is the ancestors alone who endow fertility upon the bodies of women. It is only when this woman experiences the vision and feels the heat--when she acknowledges the power of the ancestors in the form of Isaiah Shembe--that she is able to conceive and rear the children who have been given to her by the ancestors.

As a final comment on this narrative, I suggest that we consider the mountain as a heaven-on-earth, that which encloses all that is sacred to the Nazarite community. By examining the aspects deemed to be holy or inviolable, we locate that which has been classified by the community as inalienable. In the historical context of rupture, domination, and enormous social and cultural diminution, the domain of the sacred must surely constitute the retention of those cultural elements deemed indipensable to collective identity and cohesion that are constantly

threatened by loss. These are what Weiner (1992) calls "inalienable possessions." In Nazarite belief, the community is reconstituted at the level of the cosmology through the reintegration of the ancestors into everyday thought and action; and in the earthly domain, community is defined as those who are able to "read" and interpret the signs--the bodily heat--for those who do not fully understand the physical manifestations. For those who do not read and write, the ancestors contain one's sense of the past, because they are the embodiment of those who you once knew; they are manifest in the present through the birth of children; and they hold the reigns to possibilities for the regeneration of the community in the future. Without the ancestors, there is no past--no sense of history, and no future--no hope for community contiunity.

Conclusion

In this paper I have discussed four forms of expressive culture--dreams, song, prayer, and narrative--as the media by which women on the peripheries of the South African political economy have generated a response to the forces of state power, both before and throughout the decades of the apartheid regime. These media have played an integral role in the reconstitution of a sense of community amongst the millions of women denied access to the advantages of centralized powers of the state. They have been the channels by which Nazarite women have been able to reformulate the construction of space and time as imposed from the centre of the state, to one more closely aligned with both a traditional Nguni epistemology and the powers of mission Christianity.[5] Under constant threat of loss and devaluation, these traditional forms have been encircled with a mantle of the sacred, the inalienable. It is in this context, that the limits of the Nazarite heaven as the alternative social order have been formulated. It is the

ancestors who embody this domain, and it is song, dreams, and prayer that enable reciprocal exchange between those on the earth, and those elsewhere, be they in heaven, under the earth, or simply lost through forces of migrant labor, violence or sudden death.

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Notes

1. It is not only the narratives that provide this kind of material. Bodily disorder--hunger, disease, sorrow, blindness, deafness, barreness--is a central metaphor for social rupture of the African peoples of South Africa in the hymn texts of Isaiah Shembe. Created by a partially literate, but highly astute man in the early decades of this century, these texts

provide ample evidence of the effects of historical fragmentation brought on by drought, disease, and more specifically by the now infamous legislation which drove African peoples off the land and into the emergent industrial centres at the turn of the century. These texts form the substance of sacred song in the Nazarite community. They were collated, added to, and published for congregational use by Isaiah's son, Galilee Shembe in 1940. The most recent publication of the hymnal contains 242 hymn texts, as well as prayers and liturgy for morning, evening, and sabbath services.

2. These hymns are written in an old mix of Zulu and Xhosa, typical of the deep Zulu spoken by the prophet Isaiah in the early twentieth century. They are in the process of being translated and prepared for publication in a series on Ibandla alamNazaretha through the Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston, New York. The translations have been done by the late Bongani Mthethwa and Themba Mbhele, with some assistance from myself. The translation of hymn 129 was done by Bongani Mthethwa and myself in March, 1992.

3. This transformation of images is not unique to this narrative. In fact, there were several similar instances I encountered, which in one case were likened to the flipping of images and channels as happens with television. See Muller (1994, chapter six) for further discussion of the integration of modern technology into the Nazarite belief system.

4. Dokoda is the Zulu word for both a temporary shelter and for the tabernacle of the Old Testament. In Nazarite religious order, the terms are literally fused, because they refer to the temporary shelters constructed by members for the while they stay on Nazarite sacred spaces during festival months--particularly in January (on mount Nhlangakaze) and in July (at the church headquarters called Ebuhleni).

5. See Muller (1994, chapter three) for further discussion of the intersection between Nguni tradition and mission Christianity in ibandla lamaNazaretha.