

Ibandla lamaNazaretha, Represented by M. P. Mpanza. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 1999. [disclaimer](#)

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MR M P MPANZA: Even though my speech is prepared in English I will speak in Zulu, because most of my congregation consists of people who cannot speak English. I will speak English now and again. First of all I want to apologise that I am here on my own. I am from a very big congregation. We had a problem, because we received our invitation quite late. The people that were meant to come with me were not able to do so.

I wish to extend our humble gratitude to the National Chairperson of the TRC for having deemed it proper for us to participate in the faith communities hearings of the sufferings, humiliations and oppressions undergone by various communities during the apartheid era. As you all might be aware, Ibandla lama Nazaretha is a unique church. It is ironic that whilst it is one of the biggest churches founded by Africans, it is the most easily forgotten when it comes to matters affecting the nation. Maybe it is due to its over simplicity and humility which has dominated its leadership for decades. It is therefore no wonder that it was only on the 12<sup>th</sup> November 1997, that we learned that we were also invited to these hearings. For the sake of those who have no background of this church, I will first briefly outline the source of its existence, its teachings and beliefs and thereafter the sufferings, humiliations and oppressions it experienced during the Apartheid period. Without the mentioning of the name Shembe, Ibandla lama Nazaretha is non-existent. The name Shembe, apart from the fact that it is a surname, was the name given to the prophet, Isiah Shembe, by his grandfather, Ntliziyo. The followers of the prophet, Isiah Shembe are therefore commonly known by the outsiders as the Shembeites, or Ibandla lakwa Shembe. The prophet Isiah Shembe was born at Ntaba Mhlope in the district of Escort in Kwa Zulu in about 1865 and when he was about 9 years old, his parents moved to Ntabaza in the district of Harrismith, where he grew up till marriage. The prophet was born from the traditional rural Zulus who belonged to no church faith. He never attended school from his boyhood, and until he was about 15 years old, he had never been in contact with Christians, nor had he ever seen or heard of the bible. At his early boyhood, he had many visions which came to him in the form of a voice from the firmament. Before Isiah Shembe knew anything about Christianity or the bible, he spoke of God with whom he claimed to be in communication, who he knew as Inkosi or ...[inaudible]. This voice which usually came with thunder and lightning directed his life and was the source of all the teachings and beliefs he, at a later stage, instilled in the minds of his followers. Later, when Isiah Shembe had already been in communication with his God, he met the bible. Through the mysterious powers of his revelations, he was able to read it basing his understanding of it on the visionary messages he received from Umbeli Nqangi. Although later he was in contact with the Christians, he never relied on the Christian interpretation of the bible, but he read and understood it as he was guided by the visionary messages. The prophet, although

from his boyhood he was always in communication with God, he never joined any church until he got married according to Zulu custom. After having married his fourth wife, God ordered him to leave all his wives, his children and the family at large and follow him. This Shembe eventually complied with. From that time, Isiah Shembe became the greatest prophet this country ever produced.

In 1910, he came to Natal still preaching the word of God, healing and performing all kinds of miracles in his ministry. In 1911 he founded his mission station at Inanda, near Durban, called Ipakamini, which became the headquarters of his church. In 1913 he was led by the Holy Spirit to Ntlagagazi which is a distance of about 80 km from Durban. From that year to this day, AmaNazaretha barefootedly take this pilgrimage in hundreds thousands or millions yearly, to worship God on the Mount Ntlagagazi for the period of two weeks. As I have pointed out earlier, Ibandla lama Nazaretha is very unique if one approaches it from the Christian perspective. Because, although AmaNazaretha use the bible in their teachings, Isiah Shembe as a prophet did not regard the bible as his sole authority of his teachings, but as a reference to his main authority, which is God. As a prophet, Isiah Shembe was converted by no man, but by God. The bible was there to support and confirm his authority. It is therefore through this that it is not very correct to categorise Ibandla lama Nazaretha as one of the independent churches. It was never a part of any Christian teachings, but it is part of the biblical teachings we built through the might of the almighty. This church can also not be categorised under traditional religions, for the simple reason that whilst traditional religions based their teachings on "Izwelelabantu" which is the voice of the people, Ibandla lama Nazaretha bases its teachings on "IzweleZulu" which is the voice of heaven which came to the prophet, and through him spread to the all the people. The prophet explored the name, AmaNazaretha, to its biblical roots as being the only name given by God to the believers, namely the Nazareths. The prophet outlawed the drinking of any beverages including beer or sorghum beer. He also outlawed smoking of any kind, albeit they are part of African tradition, for they are incompatible with laws relating to the Nazareths. Isiah Shembe regarded beer drinking and smoking as health hazards and not suitable for AmaNazaretha. He further outlawed pre-marital sexual intercourse, the use of medicine as a form of healing, the practice of divination or sorcery, the use of mediums or spirits, although these form part of African traditions. For such practices are repugnant to biblical teachings. Isiah Shembe allowed polygamy and when confronted by Christians, his reply was simply this: "I was not sent by man, but by God and God did not tell me of a sin called polygamy. Those who sin are the ones who divorce and thereafter take another wife".

From its inception, this church under its founder and subsequent successors in leadership, grew very fast and as Mrs Wells confirmed in her manuscript entitled Shembe, and I quote: "Everywhere, chapels and churches and schools were empty as Shembe approached and the people crowded to listen with great joy. Immorality was driven to shame. Mental snobbery was pricked like a bubble and a simple folk wearing skins or next to nothing accepted the gospel with great joy and were baptised. Then the greatest enemy were the missionaries who then waged warfare against Shembe because they said he was undoing much, if not most of what they had done. They had

taught people to wear clothes and now Shembe said it did not matter if the people wore little or nothing, if they were modest and clean." This warfare against Shembe by the missionaries had a very negative impact on the growth of this church. Because of the short time given to me to prepare for this hearing, I am unable to give all the specific incidents that led to the suffering, scorn, persecution and false representations against the church from the time of the prophet to this day. The missionaries had vowed to wipe it from existence and in so doing, they agitated the government of the day to stop all its activities. For example it is a fact that there were laws which were passed in Natal forbidding the Shembe to enter the black reserve, if he did not have permission from the Magistrate. And the Durban municipality forbade him to enter the locations. All Shembe's moves were closely monitored for his was not regarded as a church, but a political movement under the cloak of religion. As Mrs Wells further revealed, Shembe was much hated by the missionaries. She further stated: "I remember a certain European superintendent of missions meeting outside Town Hall in Durban and accusing and denouncing Shembe with much hate. He brought his clenched fist down in his open palm and affirmed 'Shembe works those wonders through the power of the devil!'. Have you ever seen Shembe, or have you been present at healing services, I asked him. 'No' said the Superintendent, "and I don't want to see him. All I want and intend to do is to crush him out of existence".

The government, through the influence of the missionaries was in important, wanted to crush this church out of existence. Shembe was told in no uncertain terms that his was not a church. In 1931 he was called to Pietermaritzburg, where he was told to demolish all his church settlements, that he was not allowed to build any church house or to use the church bells in calling people to the church service. It therefore came to pass that the Nazareths developed a culture of worshipping God whilst seated under the trees and calling people to the church service by shouting loudly, up to this day.

As I pointed out the church had long been instructed never to build church houses or to establish any further church settlements. The church was ordered to demolish even those houses which were already existing. In 1950, the successor in leadership, the Lord of ...[inaudible] built a big church house at ...[inaudible] with the installation of a church bell. He was then confronted by local missionaries and was again reminded that his was a not a church and therefore the building of that church house and the installation of the bell was repugnant to the government. The church building and bell was then confined to a ...[inaudible] only. The question facing the church was how to spread its gospel in the face of the government's restrictions. The prophet had instructed his son and successor in leadership, Johannes, to take many wives. According to Zulu custom, the man is entitled to establish his home when he has a wife, and a man can have as many homes as his wife. Whenever Johannes Galile Shembe wanted to establish a church settlement, he pointed out that he was a man with many children and he wanted the land for his children. When the land was then allocated to him, it became a church settlement and the government was unable to attach him, as the home was always registered in his personal name, so was everything that belonged to the church because the church was not recognised as a church. The

struggle in favour of the church recognition was fought for years until in 1985, when the church joined RICA and was assisted by Bishop R.P.B. Mbwela.

The death of the prophet Isiah Shembe in 1935 brought in great joy among the missionaries in Natal. Their aim as the superintendent had vowed was to see to it that not only Shembe was dead, but that everything about him was intact with his bones. They met and discussed the matter and thereafter sent to Galile Shembe a very prominent black leader, Dr L. Dube to convince the successor in leadership that it was not worth his education to lead Ibandla lama Nazaretha which is full of amaQaba, or heathens. As Galile once put it in his sermons, and I quote, "After my father's death there were many people who advised me to abandon this church and join the Wesley Church or American Board. They promised me money to go overseas, where I was to be trained as a minister so that I could come back and become their priest. This church of your father is wrong, it takes people away from the path of God. The first person to say this was a black man. He said, these people will give you trouble for they are not educated, you will not be able to lead them. After two months I met a white man in Durban who knew my father. He said, 'Is it you who took over from the work of Shembe?', I said yes. He then said, 'No man, what can you do, you cannot rule black people. Black people always fight. By the way, you say that you do not drink liquor, you shall see that all of them drink. And if you talk to them, they will fight you. Leave this people, if you want to be a priest, go to American Board, or to the Wesley Church and be a priest there. I did not reply to this white man, but I wondered how his talk came to be the same as that of the black man who had come to tell me the same story."

When they realised that they were failing to persuade Galile Shembe to abandon the church, they devised another plan aimed at a complete annihilation of the prophet and his work from the face of the earth. The story was systematically concocted that the self styled prophet, an impostor, Isiah Shembe told his followers that like the prophet Elijah, would be taken to heaven by a heavenly chariot. He then took his followers to Mount Ntlangakazi to see him fly to heaven. When he was on the mountain, he attached feathers to his body and when he jumped from the mountain, trying to fly, he fell on the rocks and died. He was caricatured in local newspapers read by black society as another ...[inaudible] who had led many blacks astray. At schools which were controlled by the missionaries, the story of Shembe trying to fly was told as a historic fact. We know that children daily suffer the scorn, humiliation and mental trauma by this everyday insult hurled against us, not only by the children, but by our class teachers, our principals, and local priests who came to conduct morning prayers at school. What caused a lot of conflict in us was that we did not know whether the story or not, for it was being told by our teachers, whilst at home it was refuted by our parents. When we reported the story to our parents they became so bitter, and like my mother would start weeping soberly and at the end we all found ourselves weeping.

Like many other children who ended up leaving the school, there was a stage where I also wondered whether it was worth it for me to continue with schooling, because of the scorn I constantly received from the teachers because of Shembe. This ridicule

and harassment of the other children at schools caused many of our children at lower classes or backslid from the church, so for a long time, the church became known as the church of the uneducated. Apart from the scorn about Isiah Shembe's allegedly attempted flight to heaven, the Nazareth children, like all the Nazareths do not shave their hair or beard. Any resistance to shave was met with severe corporal punishment and other teachers used to roughly cross shave them so that at the end they looked more or less like Mr T. And we were told to go Shembe schools, which were non-existent. Since shaving is strongly tabooed in the church, the forceful removal of their hair is tantamount to the denial of their faith. This cruel treatment by many teachers, which still occurs even today, caused other parents to take their children out of school. The Nazareths usually do not marry according to Christian rights, for polygamy is allowed in the church. What therefore happens is that to complete marriage, the Nazareth has to undergo three phases. Firstly, the waiting is ceremonised in the church by the priest, but that marriage is not recognised by the government. The second phase is the traditional wedding which is ceremonised by the chief witness who has no interest in that wedding. These outsiders usually come drunk to that wedding and make it nothing more than a mockery. The third phase is that the bride and bridegroom's parents and the chief witness have to go to the marriage office to have the marriage registered. The priest from the church is irrelevant. Isiah Shembe, as a prophet taught his people to respect the authorities, but promised that through our constant prayer and supplication to God, one day God will answer our prayers. In 1920 he composed a Sabbath liturgy, which he instructed the Nazareths that it would be read before God three times every Sabbath day from generations to generations. In the introduction of the liturgy he wrote that it is the hymn of the Sabbath, the hymn of remembrance from generation to generation and the hymn of fasting in order to remind God of our suffering. Isiah Shembe also taught that the Nazareth must lead a simple life and that every year they must walk on foot to Mount Intlangazasi, to worship God and report all their sufferings. So, for AmaNazaretha, whenever they were confronted by the government, for other missionary churches, all they had to do was to ask the congregation to kneel down and have Isiguqa, which is a special prayer to God. Having said all this, it is important that we show the way forward. On behalf of my church, I now extend my hand of friendship to all those who made us suffer and in the words of Jesus Christ, we say forgive them Lord for they did not know what they were doing.

On Sunday afternoon when the TRC national Chairperson, Archbishop Desmond Tutu was conducting a church service, in his sermon he said that we are all partners to God. We are here to assist God to mould this country and to make it fit living here. In my view, the religious community cannot fail to do this. If only we would clearly understand what our mission is. This is irrespective of whether we are Christians, Nazarites, Jews, Moslems, Hindus or traditional religions. Our main mission is to work for God and working for God means doing what God appreciates. Whilst we are liberated politically, we acknowledge that there is a fast deterioration of humanity in our society, which is reaching an intolerable level. We have to focus our attention as churches and faith communities on this reality. As religious people, we must not allow ourselves to be too influenced by political rhetorics which are only meant to win

votes, but we must face the truth. It is our duty as religious people in South Africa to put aside our religious differences and to work for a common goal of making South Africa become a decent country. In doing this, we have to look at the causes of our problems. It seems to me that among us blacks there is a culture of indolence, lack of work ethics and general irresponsibility, which we have to address without fail. We cannot expect other people to do so, lest they be labelled as racist. The greatest enemy of a black man is liquor. As long as we are producing the generation of drunkards, we can forget about a decent society. Drunkenness always goes hand in hand with laziness, irresponsibility and uncouthness. We can think of many projects, create many jobs, but unless we address this problem seriously, we are just wasting our time.

I would be failing in my duty as Shembe's representative if I were not to tell the truth as he would if he were here today. It is quite interesting to listen to other people confessing their sins and we tend to regard ourselves as holier than thou, but time will tell and is already telling that there is a lot which is lacking in black society. The greatest mistake we can make is to fail to appreciate our weakness and keep on blaming others for all our inequities. A person with that kind of attitude can never correct himself. There are issues in black society which must be publicly addressed by blacks themselves without fear. Apart from indulgence in liquor, the culture of indolence and general lack of work ethic prevailing among our society is an issue we address very seriously. We seem to be very good in uniting ourselves when we are going to fight, when we are going to burn schools, or necklance other people, when we are toyi-toying, when we strike for the reduction of work hours and six months' maternity leave, but there is such a discord, quarrel and enmity amongst ourselves when it comes to the real socio-economic development of our country. The taxi industry is typical of what I am talking about. Why do these people keep on killing each other? Why can't these people organise themselves peacefully, like whites or Indians? The answer from the politicians is the legacy of apartheid or the third force. My church has a very big following, which has now more or less 5 million members. Because drinking liquor is strongly tabooed, I am very proud to say without fear of contradiction that AmaNazaretha are among the most hardworking, trustworthy and reliable people in the black society, where they are in the majority. It is unfortunate that Christian denominations, unlike the Muslims and other faith communities, for reasons not clear to me, only pay lip service to this epidemic. Ibandla lama Nazaretha, unlike many Christian churches, is able to recruit membership from different communities among the blacks. The secret lies in its simplicity. A person does not have to think of what dress, trousers, suit or shoes he must wear when coming to the church service. All we emphasize is that he must be clean. If he is living at a place where there is no water, he is still encouraged to come to the church service to listen to the word of God. As Dr Bacon once put it, Ibandla lama Nazaretha is the foot of an organic growth of Christianity on the African soil. An institution in which the gospel message is incarnated into African culture, mentality and community life and Africans are there to worship God in an African manner in order to address the mentality and the needs of Africans in a way in which Africans sense their spiritual and social needs. In Kwa Zulu Natal and Gauteng, when the Nazareths are in big numbers, this church has converted many hostel dwellers, thus able to unite the most

of the sophisticated township people with the rural people. Because the church addresses the hearts of the people, I have seen many warlords not throwing away their sticks but changing their sticks into staffs, and using these staffs for healing instead of beating. The shields used for fighting are then used for dancing for the Lord. The war cry is then changed into praise of the Almighty. In conclusion, I wish to say that we, as a church, shall endeavour to appeal to the hearts of many to promote decency, hard work and self reliance in developing our country.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very, very much. We are very deeply grateful. I will ask my colleague here, Bongani Finca to put a few questions to you.

REV. B FINCA: Thank you your Grace. The Chairperson has asked me to be very brief and I wanted to do two things. The one is to pay tribute to you for the submission you have made before the commission, and the respect that you have shown the commission by preparing yourself so extensively. This shows that you are recognising the dignity of the Commission itself.

Secondly I wanted to do my own personal confession before you and ask you to forgive me. But I won't do that. I was student in 1969 at ...[inaudible] and I used to pass by bus to Sbonelo and what you are saying about ridiculing and laughing – all the insults about what we used to see as we passed through Phakamile, as a boy I was part of that. I was a victim myself of my own upbringing and somehow I would like to say so, if you could forgive me.

Two questions I want to raise with you. We are trying here to establish a picture of what religious communities did or failed to do in the whole struggle with apartheid. In your own submission, I would like to isolate perhaps you may have passed through it quickly for you to isolate those things. When you look back, you become proud of a contribution in the struggle against apartheid.

Sorry, and just so that I don't come back to you, and also very briefly just to outline without going into detail, those things that you are sorry about. Not generally, but about the struggle waged by this country to eliminate itself from apartheid. Secondly I would like you to comment on the treatment that Ibandla lama Nazaretha gives to women. You are taking the podium soon after the very eloquent submission of how religious communities have really assaulted the dignity of women. How do you see yourselves in that on that question?

***REV. M P MPANZA: First of all, our congregation is the only congregation that is actually boasting, it is the very first congregation that when the missionaries came from overseas, trying to change and trying to force the people to abandon their culture and tradition, but we resisted. Instead, we continued to worship God using our own culture and tradition.***

In other words, all that is happening right now that is actually opening the eyes of the people to worship God, it's something new but the church that had that concept long ago, it's there. It's our congregation. Right now, it's what the people have realised that

it's what they were supposed to do, because Shembe was telling the truth that people are supposed to worship God in their own way. Our congregation is boasting, because when Shembe came he taught the people to respect...it is not very easy to see a congregation who is so respecting, like our congregation, irrespective of whether they are men, women, girls or boys. It was one of Shembe's teachings, therefore we are proud to say that Shembe taught us not to drink liquor, we must not smoke cigarettes, we must not use medicine. I remember when I was still very young, when the boys were smoking, they thought that I was stupid because I was not doing what they were doing, I was not drinking. But right now, Shembe's teachings against smoking, it's only now that the people have realised that it's a problem: it's very difficult for them to stop smoking and drinking. Shembe realised long ago that it's very wrong to drink liquor, but it's only now that people have realised that it is wrong. We don't have a problem with alcohol. We don't have people who are smoking, e don't have people who are addicted to drugs, but it is what you will find among our congregation. You know, even if a person is going to our church, he knows very well that smoking and drinking is wrong.

REV. B FINCA: Could we then begin to focus on the problem areas?

REV. M P MPANZA: There is a lot of things that we regret about, especially when our leaders died. Sometimes we didn't have time to tackle the problems in time. If our leader died, we didn't have provision on how to appoint a new leader, so we would find ourselves in problems, because we would be taken to court and a lot of money would be wasted, because we didn't take care in our constitution, we didn't make provision of electing or appointing new leaders, therefore we would experience conflict. So I can say it is where we actually lacked the necessary procedures.

REV. B FINCA: The last thing about the Ekuphakameni congregation, what is it that they do to show that they respect women?

REV. P M MPANZA: We don't say anything about rights, we just talk about respect. Respect is something I have already said that we respect each other, we respect the young, we respect the elderly people. We are people who have respect. We say nothing about respecting other people's rights. We know that if a person is assigned to do something, each and every body has got his or her own assignment, but whatever they do there is always respect in it.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

REV. B FINCA: I would like to thank you for all you have said about your congregation. Most of it is true. A person who normally visits your church at the end will have a question of what happened to the other people. I don't know how can we spread this spirit of your congregation in our community, in our society, more especially the black community? There is something that I would like to ask. This leadership of yours, it looks like it is something that is associated with the kingdom, the culture of the kingdom. Because I can see from Isiah, Galile and their children

that there's a time whereby God would come out and point out the leader who is not coming from that family. I wish to say that the leadership of Ekuphakameni has got nothing to do with the royals. I think it's actually following the guidelines from the bible. What is more important here is that...before that I want to say that a person who is a leader in the royal family is a person who is a prince. In Ekuphakameni, there has never been any person like that who would become a leader. Galile was not a prince, it's only ...[inaudible] who was a prince. When Galile died, it's only his brother who became a leader. After his brother , it was their son. If I'm saying it's following the guidelines from the bible it means, even from Israel, Jacob was appointed and after that it happened like that. All their children became the priest. If God has chosen that anyone who is a brother or son to that family becomes a leader, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's the first thing that happened in Ekuphakameni. It's not our culture or tradition that's been used there as a procedure. I think that it's something that came from heaven.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much Mr Mpanza. You have given us your story so clearly therefore we are able to get the details of your teaching. Thank you very much.

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