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Brown, Karen H., "White Robes For Worship: The *Umnazaretha* of the Nazareth Baptist Church In South Africa" (1996). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 878.
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WHITE ROBES FOR WORSHIP: THE *UMNAZARETHA* OF THE NAZARETH BAPTIST CHURCH IN SOUTH AFRICA

Karen H. Brown

South-eastern Africa was a major locus of Christian missionary activity during the 19th and early 20th century and some dozen or more denominations took to the mission field among the Zulus.¹ A Zulu man, Isaiah Shembe (c. 1879-1935) was one of many attracted to the Christian faith. His independent and questioning nature, however, did not allow him to fit into the structure of the white-led missions. Shembe founded his own church, the Nazareth Baptist Church (*Ibandla lamaNazaretha*), around 1910. Its beliefs and practices are based on a unique synthesis of Christian, largely Old Testament, dogma and Zulu traditional beliefs. In addition to its specific theology, the Church is well known for the charismatic family, the Shembes, who have led it for some 85 years and the characteristic uniforms for worship and dance worn by its followers. This paper is concerned with the white cotton textiles which have been shaped into gowns known as *umnazaretha*, after their followers, the *amaNazaretha* or Nazarites.²

From Isaiah Shembe's humble beginnings as an itinerant preacher and healer, the Church now has some 300,000 members who live throughout south-eastern Africa.³ Church headquarters are in the black township of Inanda, near the port city of Durban, however, many Nazarites worship at regional branches through out south-eastern Africa. They are served by a network of ministers and other Church officials who work with Isaiah Shembe's descendants to maintain traditions. The majority of the members are Zulu-speakers and the predominant language used in services is Zulu. Despite the Church's seeming emphasis on Zulu identity, as seen in their dance uniforms, people from other ethnic groups (such as Swazi and Shangaan, both culturally and historically linked to the Zulus) do attend services and often wear their own "traditional dress".

The Church is best known to outsiders for its annual dance festivals which attract thousands of members and visitors. Dance groups are determined by gender, age and marital status and their uniforms are either based on traditional Zulu dress or on Highlands military apparel. Church members consider dance to be a form of prayer, and participation in a dance regiment is an important aspect of the religious experience (Mthethwa 1989). The majority of members, however, are merely spectators at the major festivals. It is possible that the focus on these dance uniforms in both the popular and scholarly literature tells us more about the interests and concerns of outsiders rather than the attitudes of Church members towards the emblems of their faith. The pervasiveness of the white gowns worn for worship services, funerals and other important gatherings indicate that these gowns are far more significant than the more spectacular dance apparel.

This paper will look at three aspects of these robes. First I will discuss their origins in the vestments of the white-led mission churches. Then I will turn to the ways in which a gown is acquired. Finally I will examine the spiritual significance of the robe

and its place in the theology of the Church.

The origins of the umnazaretha

There is no evidence that Zulu-speakers in the pre-colonial era ever spun or wove cotton. Nor was woven cloth available to many before European traders arrived in the 1820s (Davison and Harries 1980). Popular dress in the early 19th century consisted of articles made from animal skins and plant fibers.⁴ Thus the use of woven cloth and tailored clothing was part of the colonial and missionary penetration into the region (Etherington 1978). White communities required all African residents, Christian and traditionalist alike, to wear European clothing from the 1870s. An important step in converting to Christianity involved the casting-off of "heathen garments". African Christians who belonged to syncretic African churches like the Nazareth Baptist Church usually were initially converted through the mission churches and also retained their western apparel.⁵

Because Isaiah Shembe led an independent group of African Christians he came under the close scrutiny of various branches of the South African government. Many of the earliest reports of these encounters include a mention, sometimes a detailed description, of both his clothing and that of his followers. These long, white robes as described by police constables and native affairs officials set them apart from those African Christians who adhered to the missions and who would not have often worn vestments off the mission station.⁶ Nazarites were (and still are) usually compared to (and conflated with) the Zionists who also wear white gowns somewhat different in style (see Kiernan 1991 and Sundkler 1961, 1976).

The earliest photographs I have seen of the umnazaretha were published in the 1930s (Dube 1936, Roberts 1936). They were taken during the last ten years of Isaiah Shembe's life and were clearly taken with his cooperation. In appearance, the gowns closely resemble those worn today.⁷ Shembe claimed that the inspiration for his own clothing and that of his followers was received in a series of visions.⁸ His biographer, in 1936, described him as wearing clothing which "resembled that of the ancient priests of the Jews" (Dube 1936, 92). Shembe's robes, in their design, closely resemble both the ecclesiastical garb worn by missionaries as well as those worn by biblical figures in the illustrations found in Zulu language bibles, prayer books and bible stories that were published during the first third of the 20th century.⁹ In turn, these prints were probably taken from a stock of Victorian-era bible illustrations popular in Europe and the United States at the end of the 19th century. The source of inspiration for these bible illustrations probably comes from two intertwined sources: liturgical dress and earlier religious painting.

Shembe, although illiterate until he was in his forties, was apparently able to repeat large sections of the Zulu-language bible from memory and had a vast knowledge of the Scriptures.¹⁰ Most missionary societies throughout southern Africa by the turn of the century had published bibles and bible stories in the vernacular languages and these

publications seem to have been widely available.¹¹ Additionally, mission schools, established by the middle of the nineteenth century included instruction in a variety of topics, including bible history (Etherington 1978, 128-131). The publications of two prominent societies with stations in the greater Durban area, the American Zulu Mission and the Trappist Mariannhill Monastery, share remarkably similar imagery, despite the ecclesiastical differences between the two societies.¹² Popular Old Testament scenes include Cain and Abel, the Judgement of Solomon, and Moses receiving the Law. New Testament illustrations predictably include the birth of Christ and other scenes from the life of Christ including the moneylenders being chased from the Temple, the miracle of the loaves and fishes, Christ washing the feet of his Apostles, praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. Most of these images are easy to read and understand and readily convey their message to a largely illiterate readership. Although there is no evidence that Shembe saw these specific texts, they do share strong similarities both in content and the type of imagery with others published at the same time. Shembe's earliest known association with African Christians was in the Orange Free State around 1906 with the Methodist Church and later the African Native Baptist Church (Roberts 1936, 28-30) and it is likely that he was exposed to biblical literature in Zulu or Sotho at that time.¹³ Many of his earliest followers in Natal had left the mission churches, including the American Board Church, and he is likely to have seen their publications.¹⁴ Interesting comparisons can be made between the illustrations found in biblical literature published by missions close to Shembe's headquarters in Inanda and both the descriptions of Shembe's visions (recounted in Dube 1936 and Roberts 1936) and the photos taken in the 1930s, however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine this aspect of the dress of Shembe and his followers (see Brown 1995).

Contemporary reports noted that Shembe used a tailor in Durban to make up his designs and then sold them to his followers.¹⁵ In the early photographs it is difficult to tell what types of material were used, but it appears to be heavy cotton sheeting. The umnazaretha worn today are made of light-weight white cotton sheeting and are fully cut with a yoke like that found on a choir robe. Although the male and female uniforms are similar, details clearly differentiate gender and social status. Men wear gowns which reach their knees while those worn by women are slightly longer and often have horizontal rows of stitching at knee-length. Married women cover their heads with a headscarf or an isicholo (the basket-like Zulu headdress).¹⁶ They also wear a white shawl made of the same cotton material which is draped over their shoulders. A black fabric belt denoting their status as married women is tied around the waist.¹⁷

Group leaders and other individuals with authority wear extra garments to indicate their status - such as a detachable, black fabric yoke, known as an isiphika, worn by female group leaders.¹⁸ Men who are preachers or evangelists wear a flowing gown which buttons down the front in either white, blue, green or turquoise modeled on those worn by Isaiah Shembe. Currently most wear dark green robes or cloaks.

Acquiring an umnazaretha

The majority of African Independent Churches regard baptism as an essential event in the life of every believer and this is also true for the Nazarites (Sundkler 1961, 1976; Oosthuizen 1985). Although children raised in the Church wear the umnazaretha when attending services, a person is not considered a full member until she or he reaches 18 years of age and elects to undergo baptism. Baptisms are usually scheduled for a weekend dedicated to the celebration of Church festivals and a large group will be baptized together. The Church observes Saturday as the Sabbath, so baptisms take place on Sunday morning. Those who are to be baptised gather with the ministers in the morning and they proceed together to the local water source. Men and women gather in separate groups on the river bank. Each person removes his or her street clothes and dons an old white gown, usually a cast off umnazaretha, often in poor shape. The two groups then rejoin in order to pray and sing hymns. After this the men and women form two lines down to the water. Each individual is given the opportunity to privately confess their sins to an elder and pray with him. Then he or she queues in order to enter the water where they undergo full immersion. Those who resurface spluttering and upset are said to have had demons expelled. Upon returning to land each person changes into dry clothes and a new umnazaretha. Once the group has reassembled on the shore, they pray and return singing to the temple grounds.¹⁹

Baptism, judging by the reactions of those who underwent it when I was in attendance, offers a fundamental spiritual experience for many followers. Many were clearly affected, some were weeping. All were in a solemn state preceding and following baptism. As they returned, singing hymns, the solemn mood slowly lifted and the singing became increasingly spirited. Interestingly, their return was not particularly acknowledged by the others who were busy preparing for the afternoon dancing. This experience thus is a personal one rather than one celebrated by the congregation of the faithful and is experienced internally rather than externally.

Although the design of the basic white gown has been clearly codified by years of Church tradition, I could find no evidence that there were strict controls placed over their manufacture today. This is different from the early reports where Isaiah Shembe is said to have had them made by a tailor and then sold them to his followers. Today, each new full member provides his or her own umnazaretha to be donned upon baptism rather than the elders providing such garb. These tend to cost nearly a full week's salary for a domestic worker or laborer, a large sum but considerably less than the dance uniforms. Most individuals order theirs from Church members who work as seamstresses.²⁰

"Garments of Heaven"

Isaiah Shembe's son and successor, Johannes Galilee (1904-1976), called the umnazaretha "garments of Heaven" in a 1958 sermon. While speaking on the subject of faith, he told his congregation:

You say this is the dress of Heaven. Don't think you will reach Heaven just because you have worshipped many years.... A white dress cannot

remove sin. We are evil and not worthy of being clothed in white. They are the garments of heaven. But Jesus lifts off the yoke. (Sundkler 1976, 185)

Here Johannes Galilee is reminding his followers that the white cotton gown alone will not absolve them from sin, and that each person must be vigilant against the many temptations of the world. This message was repeated quite vehemently in the 1990s to a Rockville, Soweto congregation I often visited. There Reverend Vilakazi and his fellow ministers called the umnazaretha a "reflection of heaven" when warning Nazarites of the very evident evils and temptations of the world around them.²¹

The choice of the color white for the umnazaretha must be deliberate given its origins in ecclesiastical garb. Additionally, cotton sheeting is inexpensive and easily available. But most significantly, the color white has ritual and symbolic significance in both Christian and traditional African cultures. White, for most Christians, is usually associated with notions of purity and innocence. For many Africans, Christian and traditionalist alike, white is an element of a triad of red, black and white which helps mediate many rituals (Jacobson-Widding 1979, Renne 1991, Turner 1967, Ngubane 1977). This can be seen in the uniforms, robes and vestments worn by members of many different independent churches (Kiernan 1991, Fogelqvist 1986, Sundkler 1961, 213) as well as in the garb of members attending mainstream Christian churches in southern Africa (Moss 1989). Within the Nazareth Baptist Church, these colors dominate the dance uniforms worn by women and girls. Additionally, much of the beadwork consists of Latin cross patterns in primary colors, outlined by a row of black beads. This is placed on a ground of white beads, and the overall effect emphasizes a balance between the colors. For Zulu traditionalists, white is associated with goodness, light and the "good things of life, good health and good fortune" (Ngubane 1977, 113). For African Christians, this is extended to an identification with purity, the angels or Christ and Sundkler writes that "white is an active and effective colour: it carries with it purity and purification and acts as a guarantee that....magic defilement has been washed away (1961, 213-4).

The umnazaretha, both a sign of baptism and membership in the Church, largely relate to notions of purity and strict rules determine the appropriate wearing of the gown. For example, they may not be worn following sexual intercourse when a Nazarite is considered ritually unclean. Acts of purification allow a return to normal behavior. This usually involves ritual bathing at a local water source, symbolically repeating the act of baptism. Members who break church laws have their gowns taken away for a period of time. This act, known excommunication, is done publicly and as is the reinstatement of the right to wear the umnazaretha (Roberts 1936, 79).

As the clergy of the Nazareth Baptist Church reminds us, a white umnazaretha is more than an outward sign of one's faith: it should reflect the thoughts and actions of its wearer. This inexpensive cotton sheeting, tailored into a simple, flowing gown, is transformed and given a sacred nature through the rite of baptism. It confers upon the

Church faithful both the rights and obligations of membership, giving them a solid structure of belief and practice in an increasingly unpredictable, dangerous and chaotic society.

NOTES

- 1 . These included Anglicans, the American Congregationalists and Presbyterians, Methodists, Swedish, Norwegian and German Lutherans, Scottish Presbyterians and German and French Catholics. See Etherington (1978, 1989) for the history of the missionary endeavor.
- 2 . This paper is based on research conducted from 1989-1993 in South Africa. I am grateful for the support of a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship (1989-91) and the assistance of the History of Art Department and the African Studies Program at Indiana University. The literature on Isaiah Shembe, his Church and his family is extensive and promises to continue to grow, see Brown (1995) for a recent bibliography.
- 3 . The figure of one million was provided by the late Bongani Mthethwa, an ethnomusicologist at the University of Natal, Durban and a Church member (interview, July 1 1988), while another academic, Prof. G.C. Oosthuizen of the University of Zululand, suggested that a more likely estimate was 300,000 (interview, 1990).
- 4 . See Conner and Pelrine (1983) and Kennedy (1978). Beadwork, which is usually identified as typical of Zulu dress, only became extensively used after Zululand was incorporated into the British Empire in 1879.
- 5 . Today many elders in the Nazareth Baptist Church claim that the majority of their members were traditionalists when they joined and that a major reason for joining was the Church's acceptance and even approval of traditional Zulu dress. Archival research, however, suggests that many of Shembe's earliest adherents were indeed Christians who had become disillusioned with the missions (Brown 1995).
- 6 . Papers of the Chief Native Commissioner (CNC) 349 562/1919, Letter from, F.J. Roach, Acting Supervisor of Locations and Mission Reserves, Block Area No. 3, Isipingo, to CNC, Natal, May 26, 1919 in the Natal Archives Depot, Pietermaritzburg. Papers of the Department of Justice (JUS) 334 4/567/21, W.E. Earle, Major for the Deputy Commissioner, South African Police, Natal Division, to the Secretary for the South African Police, Pretoria, 20 Sept. 1921 and papers of the Native Affairs Department (NTS) 1421 24/214, Statement of Dhlamvuza Dhlamini, Native Constable, South African Police, Ndwedwe, to Magistrate's Office, Ndwedwe, 31 Jan. 1923 in the Central Archives Depot, Pretoria.
- 7 . For good examples see Payne (1930), Roberts (1936), Dube (1936) as well as the Daily News, April 4, 1939 and the Natal Mercury, April 5, 1939.

- 8 . This is not unusual. Sundkler in writing more generally about African independent church leaders discusses the importance of dreams and visions for determining both the style and choice of color or uniforms (1961, 213-4; 1976, *passim*). Comaroff reports a similar situation among the Tswana Zionists (1985, 205) and Fogelqvist on the Swazi Zionists (1986, 65).
- 9 . This resemblance was also pointed out by Comaroff (1985, 204-206) in her study of Tswana independent churches and the clothing worn by their members in the late 1960s and 1970s.
- 10 . According to Sundkler, Shembe learned to read and write in order to record his hymns (1976, 186-187). Payne describes Shembe's prodigious memory (1930, 203), while his familiarity with the Scriptures, "which he quotes from memory", is described by Chas. McKenzie, Magistrate, Ndwedwe to the Chief Native Commissioner, Natal, Jan. 22, 1923, Papers of the Ndwedwe Magistrate, 1/NWE 3/3/2/17 file 2/26/22/2, Natal Archives, Pietermaritzburg.
- 11 . Etherington does not give any dates for the publications of vernacular language tracts but does note that "portions of the Bible...were translated and printed just as soon as missionaries acquired a reasonable amount of Zulu" (1978, 157).
- 12 . For examples, see the American Zulu Mission's Incwadi Yemibuzo Ngezindaba Zebaibeli (190?) and J.B. Sauter's Izindaba zas'eBaibeleni eliyiNgcwele published by Mariannhill (1933). The missionary Josiah Tyler who was responsible for printing some of the American Zulu Mission publications wrote that "the Zulu Bible, printed by the American Bible Society, answers not only for missionaries for the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, but for the Norwegian, German, and Swedish societies, as well as the London Missionary Society among the Matebele Zulus" (1891, 259).
- 13 . According to Tracey, Shembe attended a school at the Methodist Mission in the Orange Free State where he had reading and writing lessons and read the Old Testament "both in its Zulu and Sotho translations and was fired by the heroic stories, for they resembled the ones his father had told him concerning the great days of the Zulu chiefs" (1955, 401).
- 14 . Dube indicates that Shembe was familiar with certain aspects of the American Zulu Mission when he recounts one of the many successes Shembe had in healing the sick. Here Shembe requested that members of the Church sing a hymn entitled "Jesu Son of David, have mercy on me" which he identified as being from the American Board (1936, 66).
- 15 . The Star, June 15, 1924. This is also mentioned in LeMare (1935, 29).

16 . The built-up headdress, isicholo, typically worn by married female traditionalists is rarely seen in the early photos of Church members when they are wearing the umnazaretha. Most of these women are wearing large and bulky head-ties, which might cover an isicholo. Photos taken in 1939 at a secular event, also show the married women in the umnazaretha and head-ties. In these photos it is clear that the overwhelming majority of women are not wearing the izicholo. See the Daily News April 4 and April 8, 1939.

17 . This belt known as iforteen or isibamba, is modeled on one originally worn by Isaiah Shembe but was transferred to the woman's uniform because so many of his early followers were female. The name iforteen refers to the day of the month when the women hold their meetings. Isibamba is a more generic term for a belt worn by Zulu women, although it is usually was made of fiber (or less commonly of beads) when worn by traditionalists. These belts can be seen in the photographs from the 1930s. Even if Isaiah Shembe did once wear a black belt and added this to the women's uniform, it only replaced an item which was once associated with the state of marriage by traditionalists.

18 . According to Doke et al., this is a cape for covering the shoulders (1990, 661). These women are known as the umkhokheli, a term which can mean "one who pays another's debts" and also means the leader in a woman's church society (Doke et al. 1990, 398). These women are also responsible for collecting church dues from other women (personal communication, Inah Shoba, Nov. 21, 1992).

19 . Information provided by Rev. M.D. Mpanza, Gibisila Temple, May 20, 1990. Baptisms only take place during important events during the Church calendar, in this instance being the isikhumbuzo of Isaiah Shembe. Here the baptism took place in a nearby river, rather than on Qubu Lake (the Temple is on its banks) as the lake is infested with crocodiles.

20 . For example, the Campbell Collections of the University of Natal, Durban, has several of these gowns which were made by Mrs. Thusi of Inanda who worked in this way. These were collected in 1984 and cost R25 each, then a substantial sum of money for a black laborer.

21 . Sermon, Rockville Temple, Soweto, Nov. 7, 1992.

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