Like the autobiography and the biography, the life history and the case history are literary genres, and, as such, they shape a particular range of data into a meaningful totality.


What can you do but disrupt a history and re-create it as another history? Of course you have multiple histories, though you can only live within one at a time.


If you are writing about my grandfather Isaiah you must ask people what he means to them now.

Londa Shembe to EG (1986)

John Dube would visit Shembe at Ekuphakameni and would say to Shembe, ‘You are an enigma!’

Petros Dhlomo to EG (1986)

People called him the Madman of Heaven.

MaDuma to EG (1987)

I must attempt to reconstruct intricate events looming behind cryptic notes; what is illegible or missing I must imagine.

Andre Brink, in *A dry white season* (1979)

Perhaps one way in which the move away from the realist narrative has influenced biography is that it has allowed biographers to depart more easily from the notion that, somehow, a complete life can be caught in the pages of a book by moving with some kind of order from the beginning to the middle to the end. Indeed it was one of the key early figures of modernism, Virginia Woolf, who argued for ‘creative fact’. As she put it, ‘A life is as much a work of fiction – of guiding narrative structures – as novels and poems . . . the task of literary biography is to explore this fiction’. What the biographer can do is focus on single events that form contrasts or connections in an individual’s life, forming a sort of bricolage that may be in some ways truer to a life than a chronological presentation.

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Another way of approaching a life must depend on the patterns that a life throws up, so that what seems to dominate are certain tropes or metaphors within which much of a life can be understood and remembered. In the life of Isaiah Shembe, memory itself becomes an all encircling trope within which other tropes operate. This is because he exists today through memory, particularly in oral forms such as the praise poem, the sermon, the remembered dream, the prophecy recounted. Within this simple trope are others which recur constantly and form a leit-motif in his life. The most important of these is the journey, the metaphor which perhaps underlies the great body of South African expressive art, both oral and written. This, apart from memory, is arguably the key trope through which one can explore the life of Isaiah Shembe, founder of one of South Africa's largest black independent churches, known as the Nazareth Baptist Church; this is the trope which can come nearest to catching in the written text the images and events of his life.

The journey features constantly in remembered accounts of Shembe's life. He was a great and untiring traveller and the largest boundaries of his journey form a great T-shape of movement, as he set out in his mid-forties, around 1910, from the foothills of the Drakensberg on the borders of Natal and the Orange Free State, journeyed down to the seashore at Durban, and then moved first south down the coast to Mpondo territory and then north beyond Durban to Zulu territory, finally establishing a centre near Durban, but always preaching, and either in search of converts or visiting small established groups of his new church, founded in 1910. His praise poem, izibongo, is full of images of movement and journeying. His hymns, now in printed form, frequently have marked above them the place in Zululand or Natal where he was when he was inspired – usually in a dream – to compose; they, as much as the praises, show Isaiah's constant movement from small centre to new centre, almost invariably with a small band of followers. Even very close to the end of his life, the hymns record his travels: he composed Hymn 197 in Durban on 15 March 1933; Hymn 199 was composed in Mchunu territory in Central Zululand on 22 April; Hymn 200 in Weenen in AbaQulusi territory in Northern Natal on 26 April; Hymn 204 was composed in the mountains in the northern tip of Zululand overlooking the sea in December 1933. Between March and December Shembe would have returned south for the great annual July celebration and in January he would have gone to the holy mountain of Nhlangakazi. The izibongo catch this perpetual journey in praises such as:

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Brisk Mover like the tails of the cattle of the Zulu people.
Anteater which digs a hole never for itself to lie in.
Its young stayed behind and slept there,
whereas it set out for the hillocks and mountains where its children live.

He said, 'My people, remain here'.
He said, 'I am still on the move, I still have others to fetch,
If need be I'll straggle on even to the territory of Mzilikazi of Mashobane'.

USokhabuzela onjeng' amashoba e'nkomo zeZulu.
ISambane esimb' umgodi kasabesawulala,
kwasale kwalal' abantwana,
kanti sona sishone 'bese themba amagquma ne'ntaba zabo.
Uthe: 'Abant' abami, salani lapha'.
Uthe: 'Ngisahamba ngisakulandel' abanye'.
Uthe: 'NakwaMzilikazi nakwaMashobane ngowangifike'.

Acting as the counter-point to the journey, there is the still point,
the holy place where Isaiah bought land and established a community,
the place known as Ekuphakameni, some thirty kilometres outside
Durban, an area that was once Indian and African freehold and is now
part of the vast sprawl of peri-urban shackland north of Durban and
one of the places of strife in Natal. Shembe's praise poem also holds
this balance between the capturing of constant movement and the
celebration of the holy place, the still point of arrival and possession,
as it has constant references to Ekuphakameni, and some of the hymns
too are marked as having been composed there.5 Dominant tropes in a
life must be born from a specific context, often both personal and
peculiar to the individual, and general and socio-historical. The
constant, pendulum-like swing in the life of Isaiah and of the church
he founded between journey and still point must be understood in
terms of the general context from which he came; the crucible of
change and turmoil and despair of the black peoples of South Africa
that marked the years of the last part of the nineteenth century and the
early twentieth century. There was a series of natural disasters or
extraordinary happenings: the rinderpest cattle sickness of 1895, an
invasion of locusts in part of Natal, severe drought, the appearance of
Halley's comet, and an eclipse of the sun. There was the Native Land
Act of 1913 which meant the expulsion of many thousands of families
from ancestral communal lands all over the country, the subsequent
sad journeyings of countless displaced families, and the impossibility,
even for those economically able, to purchase land and thereby
security and settlement in white areas. There was also, of course, the
Act of Union of 1910 which excluded all blacks (except those Africans
on the voters roll in the Cape and 'Coloureds' in the Cape) from
participating as voters in the new political union. Journeys and

4 See Izihlabelelo zamaNazaretha, J. Galilee Shembe (Elite Printers, Durban, 1940), 150–6;
for Isaiah's izibongo see Gunner and Gwala, Praises, 56–7.
5 See Izihlabelelo and Praises.
movements of both displacement and searching were a factual reality of black life. No wonder, then, that African Christianity, caught in the vice of socio-political pressure and observing the expression of elemental unease in such happenings as eclipses, comets and droughts, should turn increasingly to its own resources for the interpretation of the Christian God.  

Within this general context of turbulence and dispossession there are also the specifics of Isaiah's life to consider. These facts too point to dispossession as a dominant motif and mark out the journey as a central trope for recording his life. Shembe was born around 1865 in the area known as Ntabazwe, or Harrismith, which is on the escarpment close to the edge of the Drakensberg Mountains in the north-east corner of the Orange Free State, and overlooking Natal lying far down below the Drakensberg foothills. It can be seen in many ways as a marginal area, neither firmly within the orbit of a consolidated Basotho region which lay to the southeast, nor close to the centre of Zulu influence, as Zululand and Natal lay to the south and the west. It was a place away from the centre, whether that be a large urban area, or an area with a strongly defined historical or cultural sense of itself. There SeSotho and a dialect of Zulu would have been spoken, in addition to the Afrikaans and English of the white farmers for whom the young Shembe worked at various times and for whom his father had also worked. His mother was an Mthimkhulu and a close relative of the Hlubi chief, Langalibalele; the Hlubis themselves after much wandering had settled south of the Drakensberg range somewhat northwest of Ntabazwe. The key visionary moments of Isaiah's early life, which are recounted constantly in sermons and testimonies as well as in written records, reflect both this marginality and the response to it. He was told in a dream by three visitors that God wanted him to preach in the land of the Mpondos (eMampondweni), far to the southeast. After some hesitation he complied and left Ntabazwe but went not so much south as east, to Durban in 1910, having preached for four years around Ntabazwe and in the Sotho area of Witzieshoek, or Qwaqwa under the aegis of the African Baptist Church. He thus moved from the margin in a regional sense to a centre — Durban. But this was not the real centre of possession. That was represented on one level by the holy village of Ekuphakameni and on another level by his reclaiming the religious discourse, by the restatement and recreation of possession both of God's message and its expression in a cultural mode that was not alien. This attempt to find, or create, a centre was to become a dominant motif in his life occurring in a number of different forms.  

Sometimes a key episode or moment can be seen by the biographer as one that sets the pattern of an individual's life, and the

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biographer needs to search for that event’s recurrence and re-statement. There is a crucial testimony that forms such an episode in Shembe’s life. The way in which it relates to the historical turbulence of the time and the sweep of dispossession in the land is very evident. Another early visionary moment contains key elements that were constantly to reproduce themselves in the church’s parables of self-identification and reification. It is a story that is told again and again during sermons, and one that is also narrated in testimonies that have been recorded orally and transcribed over a number of years. Along with the other key early visions of Isaiah’s life it has acquired what could be called a canonical status in the testimonies of the church. The story is a very simple one, and very powerful in a healing, regenerative way. It is about being hungry and stealing peaches – and it is about dispossession of goods, power and authority and a response to this. Briefly it goes as follows: one day as a young boy herding sheep for the white farmer for whom he worked, Isaiah became very hungry, he knelt down and prayed to God telling him that he wanted to take fruit from the white man’s orchards, and he prayed that the white man would not catch him. He then climbed the tree and collected peaches in a sheepskin. Suddenly the white man appeared underneath the tree holding a long, thick stick: ‘He came and stood right underneath the tree, talking to himself agitatedly: “If only I could find those boys that are stealing my peaches, wouldn’t I fix them!”’. Shembe looked upward and listened to the voice of God and the aggressive and vengeful white owner passed by without seeing the thief in the tree. And so God helped Shembe claim what the white man would keep from him. While this emblematic story clearly would end differently if it were one of the guiding parables of a revolutionary movement, it nevertheless contains within it a powerful sense of wrongness and of the fact of repossessing. It is also simple enough and open enough to lend itself to different interpretations and therefore to remain satisfying in its inclusive rather than exclusive nature.

Another canonical story carried in the testimonies of the church, and used constantly in the sermons, is one which emphasizes the outsider moving to the centre and claiming power for himself and his followers. It relates to Shembe’s first journey to what then became the holy mountain of the Nazarites, called Nhlangakazi, about eighty kilometres north of Durban. Shembe made this first journey, which thereafter became an annual pilgrimage, in 1912. The similarities with the story of the Israelites seeking the holy mountain of Sinai where, with Moses as intermediary, they received the tablets of stone before they returned from exile to their holy land, are quite clear. Shembe, having been told by God to go to the mountain, went alone, leaving a small group of followers some miles away to await his return. Once

7 Solomon Mdluli, _A history of Isaiah Shembe_ (Zulu MS. dated 1987, 18pp.). Mr Mdluli, a preacher of the Church in the Nyuswa district, kindly gave me a copy in 1987.
there he fend off attacks by hostile people in this Nyuswa area who suspected that he had come to steal their goats and, alone on the mountain top, he was tempted by a succession of false images before the voice of God came to him, accompanied by ‘a wonderful aroma that drifted over the whole mountain top’.

According to the Mdluli account, and to the received oral account, Shembe was then told of his special calling by Christ who appeared and told him that he was to spread the Nazarite creed ‘to the four corners of the earth’. This constantly repeated account of the first journey to the holy mountain validates the church’s sense of its mission and its calling and centres its role as an agent of repossession. Like Moses, Isaiah would lead his people from his Mount Sinai to the promised land. This account stresses dispossession and a response not of confrontation but eventual fulfilment.

The biographer needs, however, to enclose in the narrative of the biography, not only the visionary tales but also the facts which are one of the fundamental elements of biographic composition. There are other details relating to the story of Isaiah’s first visit to Nhlangakazi. They are unimportant to the repeated visionary story, yet significant if one wishes to grasp the precise details that were also part of that event and part of the picture of his life. They also obliquely underscore the trope of the journey and the move from margin to centre. An elderly woman, who was at the time a young girl in the Khuzwayo household where he stopped to ask for water, remembered that when he came, he spoke Zulu with a strange accent which she thought must be a Xhosa accent. It was certainly not a Nyuswa regional Zulu accent. On the level, then, of belonging in a way that related to accent and dialect which marked insider and outsider, he was still an outsider, a journeyer from the distant foothills of the Drakensberg at the far fringes of Zulu influence and at the fringes of Sotho influence as well.

Besides the evidence of these large, central visionary events and the question of how one relates the meaning of these to the facts of his life, there are other kinds of testimony about Shembe that go beyond fact and are crucial if one is to understand his life and its meaning for his followers. Here too the motif of dispossession is central and is stated within the trope of memory. These are often related to prophecy and this particular prophecy relates, like the peaches parable, to dispossession. Unlike the peaches story, though, it has no resolution and is altogether more urgent, suggesting a shift from a remembered past which has been formalized and handed down through remembered incidents, to a painful present which carries the past within it but remains open-ended. In 1926, during a visit to Mthethwa territory, near Empangeni in central Zululand, Isaiah is said to have ordered the stones which marked the Nazarite space of worship, the

8 Ibid., 13.
9 MaNgema to EG, Interview, January 1986, Nhlangakazi, Nyuswa.
temple, to be moved because in future years a railway line would run through that particular spot. This prophecy is often related by followers from that part, and it can be found with different emphases. One version was given to me by James Mthethwa, who had been present as a young boy when Shembe ordered the positions of the stones to be moved. He had written his testimony which he meant to hand in to the church secretary. Besides the usual details, his account had the fine workings of someone remembering a childhood incident and setting this within the frame given to the prophecy as an important part of Church testimonies about Isaiah’s sayings and actions in Mthethwa territory. This part of present KwaZulu has remained very loyal to the Nazareth Baptist Church and many busloads of ama-Nazareth from the part, known simply as ‘KwaMthethwa’, arrive for the annual January meeting at Nhlangakazi Mountain. James Mthethwa’s account, was an updating of the prophecy, linking it not only to the coming of the railway but, far more importantly, to the loss of land available for black people all round that area. The most recent losses were in Mthiyane and Dube territory to the south and north of Richards Bay as that area expanded. This led to the removal of many people to dry, barren areas some fifty kilometres north west, beyond Empangeni. In this updating of the prophecy the port of Richards Bay is mentioned and the statement becomes an elegy, a cry of loss:

He said: ‘That town will become so big that it will swallow up all the Mthethwa people here and those of other groups, just as it is today’ . . . I remember . . . he said also how sad he was because the territory of Mandlazini of Mthiyane [around Richards Bay] would all be eaten up and that of the Mkhwanazis at KwaDlangezwa [around the University of Zululand]. I was amazed to hear him say that the land of Mthiyane (Sokhulu) and that of Dube too, the whites would eat it up.

He said the same would happen to all the territories up to the Swazi border and to the north and west to where the country we today call Namibia is. He said the whites would eat all of it and build their climbing plants and their homesteads . . . He said it would be us, the younger generation and our children and our grandchildren who would be greatly troubled.10

Clearly this is – in one way – the voice of James Mthethwa rather than Shembe. And anyone who knows the area around Empangeni, with its vast seas of rolling sugar cane on huge white estates and the patches of African land sandwiched in between or tucked away, sometimes visible, sometimes out of sight and mind and far from water will know exactly what James Mthethwa meant. What is interesting is that the original prophecy, and the underpinning emphasis in the Shembe visions on dispossession – and the relative positions of black and white vis-à-vis possession and dispossession – enables this prophecy to be updated. It becomes centred around dispossession, yet at the same time it enables Shembe to continue to be given a voice in interpreting,
and therefore in some way controlling, what is seen as the terrible present.

The kind of evidence that I have cited above is not in any obvious way fact, yet it is real. It is clearly central to Isaiah Shembe’s life as it is understood by his followers. The visions and the prophecies are in a way as important, perhaps more important than the facts of his mission – his early preaching in Durban when he lived at, or in the vicinity of, the Somtseu Men’s Hostel, his later acquisition of land at Inanda at the place he called Ekuphakameni and his tireless travelling, mainly on foot but sometimes using the rail system, first to the south to the part called loosely ‘eMampondweni’ around Port Shepstone, and further south to Harding, and then north to Zululand.

Possibly, though, the two kinds of history and kinds of truth cannot be separated so simply and cleanly. There is another way in which Shembe, moving from the margins to the centre, began to create symbols which marked out his church, giving it stability in a time of great cultural and political stress and turbulence. This, for the biographer, is another aspect of the important trope of the journey and of the motifs of dispossession and repossession. While travelling and evangelizing, Shembe and his little group of young men and women would, on approaching a homestead, begin by beating the large round drum used by many Zionists, and they would sing the hymns that Shembe himself had composed. Often the girls would lead the group in, dancing the steps which Isaiah had taught them or which they had devised themselves. Often Shembe would visit the homestead of chief or headman and hope to extend his influence if he were able to convert a figure of authority. If he did obtain the nucleus of a following he would sometimes leave a woman in charge, a deaconess (umkhokheli), and visit again or send an evangelist when he could.11 This side of Shembe, which co-exists with that of the heavenly visionary and dignified church leader, is caught in a photograph of him where he stands dressed in long fine heavy robes, the robes of a prophet and man of power and dignity; in the corner of the photograph, almost out of sight, is a little billycan – a reminder of the sparse rations he would take on his endless travels to established Shembe settlements and to new areas.

In the drive to create a new centre, to journey from dispossession to possession in the sense of spiritual regeneration and cultural wholeness, Shembe in some ways was able to adapt and use elements of Zulu dance and spectacle to give his own followers a distinctive way of ‘dancing to the Lord’ which could be seen and felt as representing a new, centred expression of African Christianity. He created visual symbols and expressive forms of dance and song that were distinct

11 Magandaganda Mbuyazi, to EG, Interview August 1985, Empangeni; MaHlabisa to EG, Interview, August 1985 Hlabisa.
from the old forms yet related to them, and retained their symbolic power as cultural expressions. Solomon kaDinuzulu was much attracted by the Shembe dances and according to his first biographer, John Dube, would visit Ekuphakameni for the July festival if he was near Durban at the time. In some ways, in the mid-1920s, the charismatic power of the two men, one the prophet, the other the weakened scion of the royal Zulu line, must have seemed equal, the one pulling against the other. Both figures were seen by white authority as potentially dangerous. Shula Marks has charted the ambiguities of Solomon’s position and of changing attitudes to him. Oral sources within Shembe’s church suggest that Solomon was well aware of Shembe’s power and status among Zulu speakers in both Natal and Zululand and may have been a little wary of it, limiting his visits to Ekuphakameni more than he would have by inclination; too many visits would be seen as diminishing his own power and dignity. Moreover, correspondence between missionaries, magistrates and police in the parts of southern Natal along the coast where Shembe and his evangelists were active, and in northern Natal and around Nhlangakazi, was fierce, if sporadic, in the years between 1912 and 1927. He was bitterly resented by missionaries, and regarded by some magistrates and police as a dangerous Ethiopian fomenting unrest. As Shembe built up his following, mainly from Zululand and from southern Natal but also from the Natal Midlands, and as numbers grew at the annual July festival of prayer, healing and dancing at Ekuphakameni, in the then peaceful Inanda, he continued to be the subject of agitated confidential official correspondence. He was, however, unnoticed by the white press until 1927 when another force, the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) led by Champion and Kadalie, was making great headway among black workers in both urban and rural areas. According to sources within the church Shembe decided that it was not possible for people to be members of his church and at the same time devoted followers of the ICU. He ordered all the men who had ICU membership cards to bring them forward and burn them. Many church members in the rural areas of Zululand would have been card-carrying members of both the ICU and the Nazareth Baptist Church and the cards themselves, the visible, printed objects, were of great symbolic importance. Hezekiah Mkhwanazi from Mthunzini, the district adjoining Empangeni, remembers Shembe saying that to oppose the whites directly could lead only to great bloodshed, and that Champion’s and Kadalie’s stand would cause much blood to flow. All men who were members of the church and of the ICU came forward and publicly burnt their cards. Hezekiah was

one of them.\textsuperscript{15} It is interesting that the second account in the white press of Shembe's festival mentions this point right at the very end of a long, fulsome description of the dancing after a mention of the peach tree parable and Shembe's early calling. It ends like this:

It was not until late afternoon that the dancers assembled in the clearing, where stamping and swaying was continued before a large crowd of Native spectators, who assembled on the banks just above.

In all this rejoicing Shembe took little part. He sat on a chair away from the crowds, cupping his chin in a lean hand, and he appeared to be deeply engrossed in his own thoughts. Around him sat a number of his white-gowned followers, and they also remained for the most part silent and strangely detached from the activity around them.

Not until sometime after sunset did the dancing cease. The most remarkable feature of the dancing at Shembe's kraal is that, as far as is known, no similar dance is practised in any part of the world. A sect has grown up with customs entirely their own - and apparently - a dance quite their own, and those who visited Phoenix yesterday will probably never forget the captivating rhythm of that swaying and shuffling.

Shembe, by the way, is strongly opposed to the ICU movement, and it is stated that he has ordered all those of his followers who have joined this organisation to return their red tickets of membership immediately.\textsuperscript{16}

Two columns along from this story is one headed: 'Unsettling the native: effect of ICU propaganda: protest by farmers: suggested policy for agricultural unions'. The message is clear – Shembe is regarded as being in some important way 'safe' and harmless (if difficult to understand) unlike the unsettling and dangerous 'natives' of the ICU. He has been sanitized and is seen only as a harmless dancer recreating safe emblems of culture which contain no hidden messages that challenge the state or a complacent white hegemony. There are accounts again, always in July, from 1928 to 1930 and then nothing. Even Shembe's death in May 1935 is not reported. Clearly in the time that he is reported, an image is being created of a tame 'native', not brutal and savage like earlier generations of Zulus nor radical and to be feared like the ICU. Those whites who were healed by Shembe withhold their names even while they testify to being healed, and the mystical and spiritual power of the man is not grappled with because it might, after all, be as dangerous in its way as the ICU radicalism. Shembe is, at this point in white South African history, absorbed into the paternalist discourse, safe, tame, neutered.

There is, however, another discourse relating in a wide sense to power, both secular and spiritual, and in this Shembe's position seems different. The prophecy of the stolen land, dated 1926, to which I have already referred, suggests the dangerous complacency of the white press and official position. The images that come from within the

\textsuperscript{15} Hezekiah Mkhwanazi to EG, Interview, Nhlangakazi, January, 1987.

\textsuperscript{16} Natal Mercury 27 July 1927.
church have a different message, an opposing message constantly stressing the journey, the reclamation and the dispossession; these factors remain constant in the consciousness of the Church and emanate from the remembered and constantly recreated life of the leader and founder, Isaiah Shembe.

Somehow a biographer has to assemble multiple images, and remain true to the consciousness, maybe even the shifting consciousness, of the church. Sometimes, too, a biographer has to show the church itself evidence that it has shunned because it has seemed dissonant or unassimilable. Perhaps, as Juliet Mitchell says, a life is not one history, but many histories, and somehow from all of them a biographer, even of 'the Madman of Heaven', can arrive at a composite truth, or at least something that will be true for a time.
