By the time Bengt Sundkler, the Swedish missiologist, wrote his book *Zulu Zion* in 1976, the Ibandla lamaNazaretha, founded by Isaiah Shembe in 1911, had already been the subject of academic studies by more than a dozen writers. Nevertheless, when he headed one section 'Shembe Mismanaged', he was thinking, not so much of this whole range of studies, but of one particular writer with whom he disagreed. Yet it would be true to say that the historiography of the amaNazaretha (as they are frequently called) has been studded with disagreement. As Hans-Jürgen Becken wrote in 1978, 'The problem of interpreting this phenomenon . . . has become a bone of contention among scholars.' This is true, even if (as is the intention of this essay) we limit ourselves to those scholars writing primarily from the perspective of religious studies.

What then was this phenomenon which aroused so much disagreement among scholars, and to what extent has Shembe been mismanaged not merely by one or two writers, but by all those who have studied his movement from the perspective of religious studies?

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE AMANAZARETHA

The amaNazaretha is one of the biggest independent churches in Natal, with a membership variously estimated from a quarter to half a million. The group was founded by Isaiah Shembe in 1911, following a series of visions in which he was asked to put away his four wives and rely on God alone. Following one of the visions Shembe declared, 'I have seen Jehovah.' He began preaching and healing in the Christian style, even though he himself had not yet been baptized. For some time he became a follower of the Baptist preacher William M.

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3 David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1982), 625, estimates the affiliated strength at 430,000.
4 Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 163.
Leshega, who baptized him, but he eventually left Leshega, convinced that Saturday, and not Sunday, was the proper day for worship. Further visions followed, including an injunction to go to the mountain Inhlangakazi. This instruction Shembe tried to avoid, but, upon being warned that if he did not obey it he would die, he went to the mountain and prayed.

As a result of these revelations, Shembe began a new movement centred on two holy places – Ekuphakameni (the exalted place) and Inhlangakazi – both several miles north of Durban, and the scene of the two major festivals of the church (in July and January respectively). Since a split in the church in the mid-1970s, the majority section has celebrated the July festival at a new site – Ebuhleni (the beautiful place), a few miles from Ekuphakameni.

The movement which he formed drew heavily on both Christian and Zulu traditions (and some of the dispute among scholars has been precisely about which is predominant in the thinking of Shembe and his followers). Membership of the movement is predominantly Zulu, and Vilakazi has described its purpose as ‘establishing a new social order among the Zulu people’.5

There were, at the latest census, more than 3,700 distinct independent churches in South Africa.6 Clearly there is great variety among them, yet, even allowing for that, the amaNazaretha stand out as distinctive in several important respects. To begin with, there are the hymns of Isaiah Shembe, published in 1940 as Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha,7 containing well over two hundred hymns mostly composed by Shembe himself, and described by Oosthuizen as ‘one of the most remarkable collections of indigenous hymns that has appeared on the continent of Africa’.8 Alongside the hymns, there is the related tradition of religious dance which forms a very distinctive part of the movement and creates an unforgettable climax to both the January and July festivals. In addition, unlike many independent churches which either encourage western dress or, more commonly, develop a liturgical uniform of their own, the amaNazaretha, especially for their dancing, wear a modified form of traditional Zulu dress.

All these distinctive traditions, though still in the process of evolution, can be traced back to Isaiah Shembe himself. He died in 1935 and was succeeded by his son Johannes Galilee Shembe, who led the church until his death in December 1976. After Galilee’s death a succession dispute developed between Londa, one of Galilee’s sons, and Amos, Galilee’s elder brother, who, until this time, had taken only

7 Izihlabelelo zaManazaretha (Durban: Ibandla lamaNazaretha, 1940).
a very limited interest in the affairs of the church. A provisional court ruling gave the site of Ekuphakameni to Londa, but about 90 per cent of the church followed Amos who eventually set up a new head­quarters at Ebuhleni.9

SUMMARY OF THE MAJOR WRITINGS ON THE AMA NA ZARETHA
For the last fifty years the amaNazaretha movement has been the source for a steady stream of academic articles. There is no reason to doubt Oosthuizen’s assertion that, in the South African context, ‘no other independent Church . . . has attracted more attention from scholars’.10 Before attempting an assessment of the more important of these writings, and particularly their interaction with each other, it is useful briefly to list some of them.

The first two studies of Shembe’s movement both appeared shortly after he died. In 1936 Dr John Dube (a founder member, and first president, of what is now the African National Congress) published uShembe,11 a Zulu biography of the founder, which has been the source for much subsequent material on his early life. The same year, Esther Roberts completed a thesis on the movement which, again, contained large biographical sections, including a first-hand and detailed account of the burial of Shembe – an event of considerable ritual importance.12

More than ten years were to pass before the next major study, but when it came it was to prove a classic. Sundkler’s Bantu Prophets in South Africa (1948)13 dealt with a wide range of new movements in a way which combined scholarship with sympathy. At this time he regarded Shembe as a ‘Black Christ’, although this was a view he was later to review somewhat. Sundkler’s book marked a watershed in the study of African independent churches. It was one of the first detailed studies to take them seriously as a religious phenomenon and to try to account for their emergence in other than predominantly negative terms.

In 1954 the Zulu scholar Absolom Vilakazi completed a Master’s thesis ‘Isonto Lamanazaretha: The Church of the Nazarites’14 which attempted a sociological explanation of the amaNazaretha. At the time this was unpublished, and it was not until 1986 that a revised version of it appeared as Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society.15 (All subsequent references to Vilakazi’s work will be to this later revised version.)

9 Londa Shembe himself estimates the comparative strengths of the two groups as nearly half a million and 30,000; personal communication, G.C. Oosthuizen, 12 September 1987.
10 G.C. Oosthuizen, Succession Conflict within the Church of the Nazarites: IBANDLA ZAMANAZARETHA (Durban: University of Durban-Westville, 1981), 1.
11 John L. Dube, uShembe (Pietermaritzburg: Shuter and Shooter, 1936).
15 See n.5.
In 1967 the Afrikaner scholar G.C. Oosthuizen published *The Theology of a South African Messiah*, a novel and controversial study of the movement, in which he tried to deduce the theology of Shembe from a detailed analysis of his hymns and argued, among other things, that Shembe ‘has usurped the place of Jesus’. When Sundkler came to write his second book on South African independent churches, *Zulu Zion* (1976), part of his energy went into a strong criticism of Oosthuizen’s approach, which he considered too western and too negative; however, his own views had changed somewhat, and he now preferred to describe Shembe as an *eikon* – an analogy he had previously used in 1969 when he had written ‘Shembe is an *eikon*, a *persona*, a reflection of the Eternal Father’.

In the last ten years, while no major work on the amaNazaretha has appeared, the number of scholars writing about the movement has increased. Hans-Jürgen Becken, a Lutheran scholar, has attempted an explanation of the various stages in the development of the movement in ‘Ekuphakameni Revisited’, Oosthuizen has written several articles on the subject, and Vilakazi has published an up-dated version of his 1950s thesis, which includes major criticism of most of the European scholars in the field. In addition, the work of many other scholars such as West, Berglund, Gunner and Fernandez has touched in varying degrees on the topic.

It would be impossible even to attempt a summary of all the work done. Instead, a thematic approach to the major concerns of some of these writers may show the areas both of convergence and disagreement.

THE POSITION OF ISAIAH SHEMBE IN THE MOVEMENT

More than fifty years after his death, the person of Isaiah Shembe dominates not merely the movement he founded, but also the work of those who have chosen to research it. Since Sundkler’s *Bantu Prophets*, all three major books on the movement have given considerable space not only to their authors’ views of the significance of Shembe, but also to an attempt to disprove the views of the others. In *Bantu Prophets*, Sundkler had described Shembe as a ‘Black Christ’. In doing so he was not singling him out, but presenting him as an example of a fairly widespread type in Southern African independent religious movements, where the prophet-founder sees himself, or is seen by his followers, as a Messianic figure bringing salvation. Oosthuizen was

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16 See n. 8.
17 Oosthuizen, *Theology*, 35.
18 Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 193.
much more specific, accusing Shembe in *Theology of a South African Messiah* of having ‘usurped the place of Jesus’.\(^{22}\) Indeed, he went even further in his article ‘Isaiah Shembe and the Zulu World View’ in claiming that ‘Shembe has now usurped the position of God’.\(^{23}\) Such views, extreme as they sound, were based on careful research, albeit allied to a very specific Reformed theology.

Although Sundkler’s conclusions are not so very different (in relation to one of Shembe’s hymns he comments, ‘Here there is no room for the son in the creed and life of the believers. His place has been usurped by another’),\(^{24}\) in his later work Sundkler took exception to what he considered the very negative tone of Oosthuizen’s arguments. So the whole section of his *Zulu Zion* entitled ‘Shembe Mismanaged’ is specifically designed as a criticism of Oosthuizen’s earlier work. Oosthuizen’s very methodical and careful analysis of Shembe’s hymns had led him to the conclusion that, in many cases, the use of divine titles and izibongo (Zulu praise-names) referred to Shembe himself and not to God. In rejecting this interpretation Sundkler had this to say:

Two methodological observations are necessary, and Oosthuizen overlooks both of them. (1) One must distinguish between the prophet’s own personal faith and expressions of faith and the testimony of his followers. (2) The principle of ambiguity of meaning: there is a constant oscillation in these terms, a double-meaning which cannot be grasped by stereotype, ready-made phrases.\(^{25}\)

Several observations might be made at this point. First, the dispute between Sundkler and Oosthuizen raises the very fundamental question of the extent to which normal Western theological methods are suitable in the assessment of cross-cultural religious phenomena. Secondly, the argument is largely one of methodology, since in many respects the conclusions both writers arrive at are not dissimilar. And thirdly, while Oosthuizen’s theological conclusions have not changed essentially in the last twenty years, the interpretation he puts on them has; his attitude towards the movement is now much more tolerant than in the 1960s, and his current views and those of Sundkler are probably not so very far apart. One incident which I witnessed personally may emphasize this. On 24 July 1986 I sat in a small neat house in the black township of KwaMashu, near Durban, and listened while Oosthuizen vigorously defended the amaNazaretha against a Zulu pastor from the Apostolic Church, who was arguing that they were all heathen who were going to hell. In a sense, this incident taught me more about Oosthuizen’s views than a careful reading of his *Theology of a South African Messiah*.

\(^{22}\) Oosthuizen, *Theology*, 35.
\(^{24}\) Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, 283.
\(^{25}\) Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 193.
Yet, if Sundkler’s criticisms of Oosthuizen were sharp, Vilakazi’s were positively vitriolic. As most of them may be said to be concerned with the wider question of whether or not it is possible to regard the amaNazaretha as a Christian church this would seem an appropriate point at which to proceed to an examination of that question.

IS THE IBANDLA LAMANAZARETHA A CHRISTIAN CHURCH?
In a sense, this is the underlying question with which most of the scholars of religious studies are dealing in their work on Shembe. Of course, it begs the more fundamental question raised above, as to whether it is possible (or at least appropriate) to make such a judgment in a situation involving a different culture and world-view from one’s own. For the moment, however, I shall leave that question aside, until considering the views of Vilakazi, Sundkler and Oosthuizen on the more immediate topic of the relationship of the amaNazaretha to Christianity.

It is important to make an immediate distinction between a doctrinal and a theological assessment of the amaNazaretha. Doctrinally, both Sundkler and Oosthuizen would agree that the amaNazaretha cannot be considered as orthodox. Sundkler writes, ‘Of course Shembe’s theology was far from being orthodox Christian.’26 Oosthuizen states that the movement ‘is not a “Church” in the Christian sense of the word’.27 Such views are based on the teachings of Shembe and his followers, insofar as these have been formulated in a way that makes them accessible to Western doctrinal appraisal. But doctrine is not, and should never be regarded as, the totality of religious identity. This is especially so in the case of African movements such as the amaNazaretha. It is part of the disagreement between Sundkler and Oosthuizen that, while the former seems willing to accept this, the latter, at least in what may be called his doctrinaire period in the sixties, was less willing to do so. It is perhaps this fact that leads to Vilakazi’s strenuous attack on Oosthuizen in his Shembe: The Revitalization of African Society. While much of this book is a re-working of his 1954 dissertation, several new sections are added. One of these is ‘Attitudes and Reactions of white Christians to Shembe’, much of which is taken up with an attack on Oosthuizen, and in particular with his interpretation of Shembe’s hymns. These specific criticisms will be dealt with in a later section. For now, it is more relevant to look at how Vilakazi reacts to the widespread claim (perhaps more strongly felt amongst mainline African churches than amongst the writers we have been discussing) that the amaNazaretha are not Christian.

Vilakazi argues strongly that the whole basis and purpose of the

26 Ibid., 196.
Shembe movement is the re-building of a strong and proud Zulu nation. But whereas Oosthuizen would claim that ‘everything is explained from the basic Zulu religious structure, which determines what and how Christianity fits in’, Vilakazi would argue that it is precisely the Zulu emphasis which gives the Christian content its relevance and authenticity. Or, to paraphrase the two views, Oosthuizen would say, because there is so much Zulu content, therefore it cannot be fully Christian; Vilakazi would counter, because it is truly Zulu, it is, for the Zulu, genuinely Christian.

It would seem to me, however, that Vilakazi has become caught in the trap of earlier Christian commentators on the amaNazaretha. Because they have argued, in varying degrees, that the amaNazaretha are not an orthodox Christian group, he feels it necessary to argue that they are, even though this leads to considerable inconsistency in his case, since he also admits that they are essentially syncretistic. While the question of whether or not a particular group is orthodox is a perfectly legitimate (though by no means straightforward) one for Christian theologians, it is not, in my opinion, either the most pressing or the most important issue for those undertaking study of such groups as the amaNazaretha. It is much more important to look at the group in terms of its own self-understanding, rather than trying to assess the extent to which it can approximate to the norms of another religious tradition. Eliade makes much the same point when, speaking of messianic movements, but using the analogy of art, he argues that ‘a work of art reveals its meaning only insofar as it is regarded as an autonomous creation; that is, insofar as we accept its mode of being . . . and do not reduce it to one of its constituent elements’.

Indeed, this raises the question as to whether the amaNazaretha wish to be regarded as Christian in the first place. My own observations clearly indicate that they are far more concerned to be seen for what they are, rather than to be assessed in terms of Christian orthodoxy. Two examples of this may be cited. First, Londa Shembe, leader of the smaller of the two rival amaNazaretha factions, commented to Oosthuizen and myself in 1986 that ‘these people [the other Shembe faction] are becoming too Christian’. By this he meant that, in his opinion, they were watering down the essential place of Isaiah Shembe in the movement. For Londa, and, I believe, for the Amos Shembe group also, the primary question is not how they are regarded by outsiders, but how they see themselves. So, secondly, it is interesting to note that Vilakazi’s book, which might have been expected to be welcomed by the amaNazaretha, has been regarded by

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31 Londa Shembe, personal interview, 24 July 1986.
them with some suspicion, to the extent that they have even discour­aged distribution of copies. One can do no more than speculate as to the precise reason for this, but at least three reasons might be posited. In the first place, the amaNazaretha may actually disapprove of the comparative prominence given to Jesus in the book (in an effort to disprove the contention of earlier writers that the position of Jesus in the movement was peripheral). Second, in spite of the fact that he appears to be taking a very pro-Shembe stance, Vilakazi’s terminology is sometimes less than flattering. He says, for example, that ‘the Shembe movement was originally conceived in several hallucinatory visions’ (my italics). Third, he writes of several ways in which the movement might be weakened or changed (for example, by a group who might wish to disconnect the leadership of the movement from the Shembe dynasty); and clearly such views would not be encour­aged by the present leadership.

It is, of course, not possible totally to avoid speaking of the Zulu and Christian elements that go to make up the theology of Isaiah Shembe. But it is much more productive to accept them as ingredients in a process of religious creativity, rather than using some rigid external scale as a measure against which to judge the ‘Christianness’ or, for that matter, the ‘Zuluness’ of the movement. Johannes Galilee Shembe, the second leader of the movement, spoke of this during a sermon in 1958 when he said, ‘Now the learned people of this earth come with their rulers and scales and they compare their own teaching with that of the others. Shembe was Thunyiwe ka Nkulunkulu, “sent by God”.’

THE HYMNS OF ISAIAH SHEMBE
To sit under the trees at Ekuphakameni or Ebuhleni surrounded by thousands of white-clad amaNazaretha and to listen to them singing the haunting hymns of Isaiah Shembe is to catch something of the religious genius of the man. Since academic interest in the movement scarcely preceded Shembe’s death (Roberts’ thesis is an exception), it is tempting to try to find the key to his theology in the hymns which he left behind, and this is precisely what Oosthuizen attempted to do in 1967. His *The Theology of a South African Messiah* is a detailed thematic analysis of the hymns under such headings as ‘The Supreme Being’, ‘The Messiah’ and ‘Eschatology’. Oosthuizen’s book has been the subject of severe criticism from both Sundkler and Vilakazi. Sundkler’s major criticism is of Oosthuizen’s contention that it was possible to submit the hymns to detailed textual analysis and extract specific doctrinal and theological information from them. He wrote:

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33 Ibid., 129.
34 Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 185.
These lovely songs of his must be interpreted, not from the presuppositions of Luther's catechism, or that of Heidelberg, but out of their own milieu, on the basis of their own presuppositions, out of the needs and aspirations of the Zulu in the context of race-ridden South Africa . . . The meaning of Shembe's poetry does not yield to brash and blunt onslaught, least of all to any arrogant attempt to coerce these visions into paragraphs of a European catechism.  

Vilakazi's criticisms are equally virulent. Their main thrust may be summed up in the quotation "The sustained efforts by Oosthuizen, (which often becomes an obsession) in his study to present Shembe I as setting himself up as God, and not, as he himself and his followers insisted, as a prophet, is surprising." This argument concerns the use by Shembe in his hymns of many of the Zulu names for God. Oosthuizen argues at several points that these names refer to Shembe himself; Vilakazi insists that they do not. It is impossible to pursue the discussion here, not merely because of constraints of space, but also for reasons of linguistic competence. One general point, however, may be made. There is a sense in which the very ambiguity of meaning of which Sundkler spoke means that the hymns are capable of a variety of interpretations, and that each of the writers quoted has given to them the interpretation which fits in with his own theological predisposition. There are passages in Dube's Zulu biography of Shembe, for example, which could well be taken to back up Oosthuizen's view of Shembe's understanding of his own divine calling and position. It may well be that the lack of enthusiasm of the amaNazaretha leadership for Vilakazi's book may indicate that, for all his linguistic and cultural expertise, they prefer in the end the alternative explanations of Oosthuizen which, though (in their original 1967 form) couched in more pejorative language, at least gave proper attention to the supernatural claims of Isaiah Shembe.

THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGIOUS DANCE FOR THE AMANAZARETHA

One of the distinctive features of the worship of the amaNazaretha is the place given to religious dance, and it is somewhat surprising that, while many writers comment on it, there has not been more detailed analysis of its significance. Though Vilakazi devotes several pages to ukusina (dancing) in the Shembe movement, his material is largely descriptive, dealing with the different styles of dance and the different types of uniform worn (many of his observations here appear to be out of date). Practically no attempt is made at a theological evaluation of the phenomenon. This is particularly disappointing in view of the fact that his own training and background would appear to equip him particularly well to attempt just such an evaluation. Sundkler has less
than one page on sacred dance among the amaNazaretha and simply says that the significance is explained in various hymns (without himself indicating that significance). 39 Schlosser’s comments in ‘Profane Ursachen des Anschlusses an Separatisten Kirchen in Süd- und Südwestafrika’ are confined to five words: ‘Man ehrt Gott durch Tänze’ 40 (God is honoured through dancing). Oosthuizen has slightly more to say in his various writings. He writes at one point that ‘dance is a way of thanksgiving, receiving and being strengthened’. 41 Clearly dance has a deeply religious significance for the amaNazaretha, and those participating, sometimes for hours on end, do so with a tangible sense of worship. The occasion is enjoyed but is, at the same time, deeply serious.

Many questions remain to be answered. To use Oosthuizen’s definition, who is being thanked, what is being received, and who is being strengthened? What is the relationship of the sacred dance to the traditional Zulu Feast of Firstfruits – the Umkhosi – one of whose purposes was the ritual strengthening of the king for the coming year? Is the purpose of the dancing the ritual strengthening of Shembe himself and, if so, does the seclusion of Amos Shembe during the dancing have any ritual significance?

THE POLITICAL STANCE OF THE AMANAZARETHA

The relationship of the whole Shembe movement to traditional Zulu customs highlights another more complex relationship, namely that between Shembe as leader of the movement and the Zulu king as traditional leader of his people. The complex nature of this relationship was particularly obvious on the final Saturday of the July festival in 1986 when Amos Shembe and the Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini were present together. Though the king was received with honour and dignity, there was a very real sense in which Amos Shembe, and not the king, was the centre of attraction, and while the king was presented with the traditional gift of a bull, Amos received from the women of the church a brand new Mercedes car. 42

The king’s speech on that day was blatantly political, condemning those, such as the South African Council of Churches and the South African Catholic Bishops’ Conference, who were advocating sanctions, and, by implication, criticizing the African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Front (UDF) and praising Inkatha, the predominantly Zulu political organization run by his uncle, Chief Gatsha Buthelezi. 43

39 Sundkler, _Bantu Prophets_, 197.
42 Personal observation, 26 July 1986.
43 ‘Speech by his Majesty Goodwill Zwelithini ka Bhekuzulu King of the Zulus at the Church of Nazareth July Festival’, unpublished, 5 pages.
Since the early days of the Shembe movement its political stance has come under attack from certain quarters. According to Schlosser the ANC criticized Shembe for having no interest in their aims,\(^{44}\) while Fernandez claimed of J.G. Shembe that ‘in effect he supports apartheid’.\(^{45}\)

The question of the political orientation of the amaNazaretha is not, essentially, a secular question, for it is closely linked with their religious understanding of the divine call of Isaiah Shembe to restore the Zulu nation. Thus Shembe himself felt it desirable to cement by a marriage-contract a relationship with the Zulu royal house, and gave his daughter Zondi to the Zulu king Solomon as one of his wives.\(^{46}\) This close (though, I suspect, somewhat uncomfortable) relationship with the Zulu royal house has continued. When J.G. Shembe was dying in hospital in 1976, for example, he was visited by the young Zulu king Goodwill Zwelithini. Today Londa Shembe has marriage-ties with one of the KwaZulu cabinet ministers, while Amos Shembe, leader of the major section of the amaNazaretha, was Gatsha Buthel-ezi’s teacher.\(^{47}\)

There are undoubtedly close links between the amaNazaretha and Inkatha, and this is hardly surprising since both movements have similar cultural aims. Yet Londa Shembe, at least, also has contacts with the UDF and seems to be keeping his political options open. To what extent this is due to a desire, in a situation of amaNazaretha factionalism, merely to take a different line from Amos will need further detailed study. It seems more likely that it reflects the uncertain political allegiance of the Zulu people themselves at a time of great ideological flux, and Londa’s desire (as the leader of a tiny rump of the amaNazaretha) not to be further isolated from such major changes as may take place. In short, the political stance of the amaNazaretha is a matter not just of secular but of religious significance, and deserves a much more detailed treatment by those working in the field of religious studies.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ibandla lamaNazaretha is one of the major independent churches in South Africa. In its origin, development, life and liturgy it presents scholars with a fascinating and colourful tapestry of religious creativity and development. Many have responded to this, and much useful


\(^{46}\) Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, 168.

\(^{47}\) For this and other information in this section I am very grateful to Professor G.C. Oosthuizen who has corresponded with me at length during the writing of this article, and put specific questions to Londa Shembe on my behalf. The interpretation put on his answers is entirely my responsibility.
work has been produced. Unfortunately, a good deal of energy has been expended in a process of cross-criticism which, more often than not, has proved to be predominantly negative in both its style and its results. In particular, the mutual criticism of Sundkler, Oosthuizen and Vilakazi has masked the very real contributions which each has made to this field of study. Sundkler’s contributions are in first bringing the whole field to the attention of a much wider public, in developing his concept of Shembe as an eikon of God, and in emphasizing the need to study the movement as a living organism and not just as a theological system. Oosthuizen’s contributions, often underestimated because of the criticisms of his Theology of a South African Messiah, have been in undertaking the first really detailed examination of the izihlabelelo (hymns) of Isaiah Shembe (which are undoubtedly one of the major sources of amaNazaretha identity), in emphasizing the importance of the Zulu elements in the religious system of the movement, and in maintaining regular and personal contact with the movement and its leaders over a period of twenty years. Vilakazi’s contribution has been in presenting us with a view which is both academic and Zulu, and which emphasizes the need to see the movement against the socio-cultural background out of which it arose and in which it operates.

Yet, having said this, it remains true that there is a need for a major study of the amaNazaretha which will take account of all that has gone before and attempt to assess the movement, not from the narrow confines of one academic discipline, but from a much wider base. Such a study would see it holistically against the background of the history, culture and society which produced it, and yet examine the changes which have taken place in it, and the role it now fulfils for its members. Several recent books have taken this approach in studies of various movements and peoples: Jean Comaroff’s Body of Power: Spirit of Resistance,48 a study of the Tshidi people; Wyatt MacGaffey’s Modern Kongo Prophets,49 dealing with the Kimbanguist church and its off-shoots; and Bwiti,50 James Fernandez’s massive study of a new religious movement in Gabon. There is no doubt that Isaiah Shembe and the amaNazaretha which he founded merit such a study. One may hope that, when it comes, it will add considerably, not merely to our knowledge of this one particular movement, but to our understanding of the whole dynamic of religious change in Southern Africa.