The Church of Nazareth Baptists is a prominent instance of the ‘Zion City’ strain within the prophetic-charismatic African independent churches (‘AICs’) of southern Africa. Originating among the Zulu and today led by a descendant of the founder, its focus is thaumaturgic healing and empowerment, and the reconciliation and incorporation of ancestors. The name ‘Nazareth’ is taken from Numbers 6, the vow of the Nazarites - Yahweh’s ascetic warrior elite in the struggle against Canaanism.

In recent decades (1980-2000) the church has grown beyond KwaZulu-Natal, primarily among Zulu-speakers in Gauteng, but also in the Eastern Cape and Swaziland, and the Nguni-speaking areas of neighboring states (Mozambique, Zimbabwe).

The Church was founded in early 20th century Natal, South Africa, by a syncretizing healer-prophet following a revelation and covenant on a ‘cosmic mountain’ - now the site of an annual pilgrimage. Oral traditions show that Isaiah Shembe (c1870-1935) was also a nature mystic whose legacy represents an exception to the AIC tradition, in which human concerns are paramount and a ‘theology of power’ prevails. A majority of the present membership remains unaware of the founder’s writings, in which his concerns for animals and environment are preserved, but consciousness of this aspect of his legacy is sustained by oral traditions. As one elder avowed, “According to our religion, no beast is caught and killed without weapons by breaking the neck” (a Zulu quasi-military custom).

The Nazareth Church’s founder was remembered as “a compound of gentleness and severity (who) loved all living things.” An expert horseman and judge of cattle in his youth, he needed just a day to bring an ox to the yoke. He seems also to have had ‘green fingers’, and later
in life, at his citadel/commune headquarters Ekuphakameni, would tell his sons not to sever tree branches, asking: “How if I were to cut one of the fingers from your hand?” He was seen to address tree saplings, and made their names known. Certainly no tree could be cut without permission and good reason. One of his praise-names was ‘flat-crown tree of Mayekisa (his father)’.

Birds were close to God, therefore to be attracted rather than killed: At Ekuphakameni fresh water was put out for them daily, and doves were hand-fed. Followers were ordered to exterminate stray cats preying on them, and they became so numerous that during service in the great temple, open hymnbook pages would be spattered with droppings.

Church legend records Shembe’s command over inanimate nature, in the calming of surf before baptisms, and the turning back of floodwaters. His prophet’s power of Edenic communication with wild creatures is heard in his hymnal (the only instance in the history of hymnology in which animals speak), and their surpassing holiness is extolled. In one hymn Adam, the defiler of Eden, is expelled at the request of its other creatures, who ask “Where shall we go today? We are separated from our Father... Help us God, expel Adam.”

One poignant incident was commemorated in another hymn so as to keep people mindful of animals’ sentience: a captive baby monkey appealed to Shembe, who bought it and told the captor to release it where it had been caught. The final verse chastises humanity with a reminder of the spiritual superiority of other creatures: “Awake, it is dawn! / When shall you awaken? / You have been surpassed by the monkeys / In seeing the Lord”. Conversely Shembe also mediated human claims to wild animals: When monkeys raided one temple’s gardens, he entreated them to remember that while God had given them forests for their food, people had to grow their own: How would they live if their food was stolen? There were no more thefts after
By Nguni (Zulu and related) tradition, certain snakes are reincarnations of persons - Shembe himself being known by some as ‘the horned viper of grace’; Once when a mamba appeared on Ekuphakameni dance-ground, the men asked if they could kill it, but Shembe warned that this was in fact a person. His request to the snake was immediately obliged: “If you want to do God’s work, go to that tree and stay there, you will be disturbing us here.” Likewise he could call upon water snakes to vacate pools in which he wanted to baptize. His followers believe themselves immune from snakebite, since he had prayed for this privilege on the Holy Mountain; accordingly anyone who killed a snake was fined.

Among domestic animals too, ‘some are people’; Cattle and goats as well as dogs were given names, and bulls adorned for the July festival dances. After a day’s dancing followed a ceremony designed as ‘an object lesson in the care of animals’: the feeding of Shembe’s old grey horse, ‘almost as famous as himself’ since it responded in kind when converts danced around it. Rules were made against any callousness or cruelty toward domestic animals. Declaring that “people are like children”, Shembe cautioned them against causing misery to donkeys by not using a load-support, or roping a milk cow through the nose (since she steps on the rope as she walks). Prayer rather than charms was prescribed for ill cattle and horses, since God had compassion for all living things. Householders who killed their dogs to avoid having to pay the colonial dog tax should be penalized by having to pay it for five years thereafter, and any chief who avoided imposing this penalty would be guilty before God. Those who killed their dogs for impregnating the dogs of others were asked “Why not castrate the dog if it had to live without a bitch?... One cannot keep a bull where there is no cow”.

Although Shembe’s own position on sacrifice was biblical (sacrifices are “a form of
gratitude to Jehovah, they hold people together by blood, (and open) the Gate of Heaven”), he is remembered as having disapproved the killing of animals. Just before one sacrifice, he sent the message “This beast has just come to me to say that it is too young to die”. At Ekuphakameni only purchased animals were slaughtered, never the home herd, and only virtuous followers were apportioned the meat. No doubt to ensure humane slaughter, he himself wielded the spear. Said to have been fond only of sorghum, he once cast to the ground some meat prepared for him, then took it back, shook off the dirt, and ate, saying “I only do what I have been told... When you seek the way of God, you do not make the search a pleasant affair”.

On the communal farms he established throughout Natal, Shembe pioneered rational and humane treatment of livestock: Rich stockfeed was planted, bulls of good breed were bought, and the tenacious Zulu ‘cattle cult’ discouraged: followers were persuaded to keep a few good milk cows rather than many scrub cattle. Cattle being the cultural measure of wealth, this challenged some fundamental precepts, but was critical to curbing overgrazing and erosion of the already barren lands on which Africans had been confined by colonial legislation, and which by the turn of the 19th century barely supported rapidly expanding populations. Followers whom Shembe settled on his purchases were governed by a strict Protestant-style work ethic, and enjoined to become as productive and self-sufficient as the Indian ex-plantation workers-turned-market gardeners alongside whom the Nazarites lived at Ekuphakameni.

Though many Nazaretha now live in urban areas, nostalgia among older members for life on the land takes most back to their rural family smallholdings for performance of weddings and all domestic ceremonies that require ancestral sanction.

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Further Reading


