

Concerned about Purity and Power: The Zionist Churches in Southern Africa

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Abstract

The emergence of African Indigenous Churches (AICs) in sub-Saharan Africa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constitutes a paradigmatic case for interdisciplinary inquiry. It has attracted the attention of historians, sociologists, cultural and medical anthropologists, scholars of religion, theologians, and many others. Rooted in a conscious break with the colonial past, while at the same time assimilating elements of the European Holiness movement and the North American Healing movement, the AICs form a highly diverse and dynamic constellation of church-like bodies, today numbering well in excess of 10,000. Approximately thirty per cent of African Christians are affiliated with one of these churches, which are commonly classified according to distinctive characteristics—the defining feature of the Zionist type of AIC being its emphasis on healing. This article first outlines the emergence of Prophet-Healer/Zionist type churches (I), then proceeds to examine their worship, ritual practices, and congregational life (II), and finally highlights issues that invite further interdisciplinary discussion and research (III).

Keywords

African Indigenous Churches (AICs), Zionist Churches, Prophet-Healer movements, Faith healing, Christianity, Southern Africa, Ritual practice, Religion and medicine, Intercultural theology

Introduction

The emergence of African Indigenous Churches—also referred to as African Instituted, African Initiated, or African Independent Churches (AICs) ¹—in sub-Saharan Africa from the late nineteenth century onwards constitutes a phenomenon of considerable scholarly interest. As a vigorous grassroots movement, it has drawn sustained attention from cultural anthropologists, political scientists, sociologists, historians of religion, theologians and related disciplines.² Establishing the precise number of AICs is difficult, partly because of the varying criteria for recognition and partly because of frequent fluctuations in their existence. Some congregations remain small and endure only while their founding prophet is alive or their supporting family and clan structures remain intact, whereas others emerge through schism, merger, reorganisation or renaming. In spite of these uncertainties, it is generally accepted that there are now well over 10,000 such bodies with some 65 million adherents, representing more than thirty per cent of African Christianity.³ In 1978 a number of these churches created the Organization of African Instituted Churches (OAIC), headquartered in Nairobi, which has since become an associate member of the All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) and has established working relations with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Geneva.⁴ This development shows that many AICs are today acknowledged, even by mainstream denominations, as authentic expressions of Christianity.

¹ "AICs (pronounced 'ikes'), as some Independents themselves fondly refer to the movements." (Bosch, David. Editorial. In: *Missionalia*. 1983, 11(3), p.2). South-African religious scholar Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen and his students prefer to speak of 'African Indigenous Churches' but label them also 'Afro-Christian Churches'. (*Religion Alive - Studies in the New Movements and Indigenous Churches in Southern Africa - A Symposium*. Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. ed. Johannesburg: Hodder and Stoughton Southern Africa, 1986, passim). On the terminology and its issues, see Sundkler, Bengt. The Challenge of the Independent Churches. In: *Religion Alive*. p. 3; Hayes, Stephen. The African Independent Churches: Judgement Through Terminology? In: *Missionalia* 1992, 20(2), pp.139-146.

² The number of published articles on AICs stood at 1,917 in 1970 (see A Comprehensive Bibliography of Modern African Religious Movements, compiled by Mitchell, R. C., Turner, H. W. 2nd ed. Evanston [IL]: Northwestern University Press 1968; Bibliography of modern African religious movements – Supplement I. In: *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1967,1(3), pp.1-207; Supplement II, ibid. 1970,3(3), pp.161-205) and has increased significantly since. For respective figures regarding South Africa alone see Chidester, David, J. Tobler, D. Wratten. Christianity in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography, Westport [CT] and London: Greenwood Press, 1997.

³ In 1968 5,031 such churches were listed in Barrett, David B. *Schism and Renewal in Africa*. London and Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968, p.79. – In 1982 their number had increased to 5,980 (see Barrett, D. B., *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Oxford & Nairobi, Oxford University Press 1982, p.815). Later statistics do not list AICs as distinct bodies any longer but provide the numbers of adherents instead. The *Atlas of Global Christianity 1910-2010*, Johnson, Todd M., Kenneth R. Ross, eds. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p.112, gives the number "in all of Africa: 98,819,000" while others assume the percentage to be "about one third of Africa's Christians". (Öhlmann, Philipp, M-L. Frost, W. Gräb. *Potentials of Cooperation with African Initiated Churches for Sustainable Development*. Berlin: Humboldt-Universität 2021, p.11)

⁴ The OAIC (URL <https://oaic.org/newsite/>; accessed Aug. 20, 2025) operates six regional offices, namely in East Africa, Southern Africa, anglophone and francophone West Africa, Congo, and Nigeria.

While some interpret AICs as “a movement towards adaption to a modern secular society without discarding the deep religious disposition ... basic to the African world view”⁵, others describe it as “a heterogenous movement of churches marked by ... institutional and financial independence from European and North American churches, ... rootedness in colonial and postcolonial Africa”, and a “spiritual worldview.”⁶ Others again see it as a response of “groups” motivated in part by Christian faith to “challenges, such as entrenched poverty, ill health, and the breakdown of African cultural and social systems”, which organize “themselves to confront these obstacles”.⁷

Overall, AICs encompass bodies that are very diverse and heterogeneous in nature. Clustered according to characteristic features of their congregational life and practice, their teachings, and their historical background researchers formerly used to classify AICs as Ethiopian, Messianic, Full Gospel/Apostolic Faith Missions, and Zionist/Prophet-Healing-Churches, which in West-Africa are called Aladura (Yoruba word for ‘praying person’) churches.⁸ However, such grouping has changed in the meantime to more accurately reflect the shift in dynamics of these entities. The *Atlas of Global Christianity* of 2009 lists “Independents” now as Pentecostal, Apostolic, Zionist, Charismatic, Neocharismatic, and “Neocharismatic of mixed traditions”.⁹ This shift towards spirit filled, Pentecostal or Pentecostal-Charismatic-Churches (PCC), many of which especially in West-Africa (Nigeria, Ghana) propagate a Prosperity Gospel and operate globally as a result of migration, is attributed not only to the influence of Pentecostalism, but also to a growing self-awareness of being African by taking “seriously spiritual forces” which “mainline churches ... tend to regard ... as superstitious.”¹⁰

Despite the present preponderance of churches of the Pentecostal-charismatic type in sub-Saharan Africa and their polemics against AICs’ local confines and the paraphernalia used,

⁵ Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. The AIC and the Modernisation Process. In: *Religion Alive*, p. 240. See also Ranger, Terence. *Religion, Development and African Christian Identity*. In: *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft*. 1986, 42(1), pp. 44-68.

⁶ Öhlmann, P., *Potentials of Cooperation*, p. 4.

⁷ https://www.globalministries.org/partner/africa_partners_organization_of_african_instituted_churches/ (accessed Aug. 20, 2025).

⁸ See Turner, H. W. A Typology for African Religious Movements. In: *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 1, 1968, pp. 1-34. On the classification see also Grundmann, Christoffer H. Heaven below here and now. In: *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 2006, 6(3), p. 257f.

⁹ *Atlas of Global Christianity*, p. 78.

¹⁰ Meyer, Birgit. Christianity in Africa: From African Independent to Pentecostal-Charismatic-Churches. In: *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 2004, 33, p.457. Reprinted with an important ‘Afterword’ in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to African Religions*. Hoboken [NJ]: Blackwell Publishing, 2012, pp.167-170. - The Pentecostal emphasis is noticeable also in the logo of the Organization of African Initiated Churches (OAIC) depicting a dove flying across the African continent.

these churches “persist and attract followers. ... Especially in South Africa, Zionist Churches still have a mass appeal.”¹¹

This article, first, sketches the coming about of AICs of the Prophet-Healer/Zionist type (I) followed, second, by a description of their worship, ritual practice, and congregational life (II), while the concluding third section highlights some issues which invite further interdisciplinary discussion and research (III).

I – Historical roots

African Zionists have nothing to do with Jewish Zionism as the label might suggest. Rather, the name refers to Revelation 14:1-5 in which Mount Zion is visualized as the heavenly abode where the Lamb of God stands surrounded by the 144,000, who “have been redeemed from the earth” for not having “defiled themselves” singing “a new song before the throne.”¹² And because every one of that “great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” was “robed in white”¹³, the ‘people of Zion’ (Zulu: *AmaZioni*) also dress in long white garments when congregating for worship. Many of these churches bear Zion in their name, like the ‘Christian Catholic Church in Zion’ (founded in 1904), the ‘Christian Apostolic Faith Church in Zion’ (founded in 1942), the ‘Union Public Christian Apostolic Church in Zion’ (founded in 1945), the ‘Swazi Christian Church in Zion South Africa’ (founded in 1962), and the ‘Christian Bantu Apostolic Church in Zion’ (founded in 1966), just to mention only a few.¹⁴ But there are also Zionist churches, which do not have Zion in their name, like the ‘Nazarite Baptist Church’ (*Ama Nazaretha*) founded in 1910 by the Zulu Isaiah Shembe, which is genuinely indigenous, and not, as might be assumed, an offshoot of Baptist missionary endeavors.¹⁵

What Zionists believe in is documented in a noteworthy document, viz. the ordination certificate of Deaconess Jenette Nkosi of the ‘Christian Apostolic Church in Zion of South

¹¹ Meyer, Christianity in Africa, p. 452. In the ‘Afterword’ of her contribution Meyer writes: “I ... realize that I may have confounded the shift towards PCCs in the attention of scholars with an actual disappearance of AICs. While there is evidence for AICs refashioning themselves as PCCs ... not all AICs take this direction.” (p. 168f).

¹² Quoted according to the *New Revised Standard Version Bible* (NRSV) of 1989.

¹³ Rev. 7:9; see also Rev. 3:4f, 18; 4:4; 6:11.

¹⁴ See *World Christian Encyclopaedia*, 2nd ed. vol. 1, p. 680f. – As early as 1948, Bengt Sundkler provided a list of hundreds of names of such churches, updating it in 1960, in his important study *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, (2nd ed., London/New York/Toronto: Oxford University Press 1961), pp. 354-374. The title of this ‘List of native separatist Churches’ still reflects the attitude typical of members of the historic mission churches in the early years of their encounter with AICs.

¹⁵ See Sundkler, Bengt. *Zulu Zion and some Swazi Zionists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1976, pp. 161-165; Becken, H. J. Ekuphakameni Revisited – Recent developments within the Nazaretha Church in South Africa. In: *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 1978, 9(3), pp. 161-172.

Africa' issued March 5th, 1965. It asserts: "Zion is the Kingdom of God; Zion's Gospel is the full gospel of Salvation from sin, healing from disease and Holy living through the power of the indwelling Holy Ghost by whom the sons and the daughters of Zion are being prepared for the coming of Zion's king."¹⁶

This statement contains the basic tenets of Zionism. It is not a formulation by African Zionists. It, rather, is inspired by the work and teachings of John Alexander Dowie (1847-1907), the "father of healing revivalism in America".¹⁷ African Zionists are – or were at least formerly – fully aware of this legacy as acknowledged by one of their earliest representatives in South Africa, Edgar Mahon (1867-1936): "If you were to ask them [the Zionists] where their spiritual roots were founded you would hear, sooner or later, that '*sadbuka kwa dowie*' (we originated from Dowie)".¹⁸ Besides, what makes the cited certificate so remarkable is the fact that there is something written at all, which is untypical for AICs in general and for Zionists in particular, because most Zionists, even their leaders, are often illiterate.¹⁹ It is further worth noting that this statement is used as a printed official credential by the 'Christian Apostolic Church in Zion of South Africa', a church instituted by the Tswana Paulo Mabilitsa of Alexandra, Johannesburg, in 1920, after he dissociated himself from the South African branch of Dowie's 'Christian Catholic [Apostolic] Church' in Zion, which was established there as early as 1904.

Skipping historical detail here²⁰, a proper understanding of the emergence of Zionist churches in Africa cannot be reached without knowledge of Dowie's widely distributed paper *Leaves of Healing* (a pun referencing Rev. 22:2). This weekly featured articles about the divine healing movement and Dowie's own faith healing ministry, while also sharing news about the

¹⁶ Quoted in Becken, Hans-Jürgen. *Theologie der Heilung*, Hermannsburg: Missionsanstalt Hermannsburg 1972, p.171.

¹⁷ So by Harrell, David E. *All Things are Possible – The Healing and Charismatic Revivals in Modern America*, Bloomington [IN]: Indiana University Press, 1975, p.13. On J. A. Dowie see Lindsay, Gordon. *John Alexander Dowie – A Life Story of Trials, Tragedies and Triumphs*. Dallas [TX]: Christ for the Nations 1980.

¹⁸ Mahon, Edgar H. The Formation of the Christian Catholic Church in Zion. In: *Religion Alive*. p.167. – The constitution of the 'Congregational Catholic Apostolic Church' states: "Our faith rests on the version of the old and new Testaments embodied in the holy bible and [we] [b]elieve in the doctrine and teachings of our former leaders John Dawi [sc. Dowie] and ... Voliva who extracted their doctrine from Zion names of Books." (Sundkler, B. *Zulu Zion*, p.64.)

¹⁹ "We know of scores of congregations where the only owner of a Bible is the preacher himself – and perhaps he is not even able to read! In spite of this handicap the prophet may impress his more simple-minded followers with his knowledge of the Book." (Sundkler, B. *Bantu Prophets*. p.27f). However, considering the fact that nowadays Zionist churches like the 'Zion Christian Church' in Zimbabwe also avail of social media (YouTube, Facebook, Instagram) and podcasts (see: Chimininge, Vengesai. The Intersection of Culture and Health in the Zionist Churches during the Era of COVID-19 in Zimbabwe: An Ethical Dimension. In: *African Thought*, 2024, sp. ed. 3(1), pp.227-249) to spread their message, literacy is on the rise in several of these churches, too.

²⁰ For an extensive account of the history see Grundmann, Christoffer H. *Leibhaftigkeit des Heils. Ein missionstheologischer Diskurs über das Heilen in den zionistischen Kirchen im südlichen Afrika*. Hamburg: Lit 1997, pp. 20-31.

'Christian Catholic [Apostolic] Church', which Dowie founded in 1896, and about 'Zion City' (50 miles north of Chicago, Illinois, USA), a community which he built in 1901 as refuge and "paradise for the righteous"²¹ who desired to live in the Kingdom of God according to biblical principles.²² The *Leaves* also disseminated Dowie's theological teaching that the Christian Gospel is a simple one and fourfold in its core. It proclaims Jesus as "Savior, Sanctifier, Healer, and Coming King".²³

The *Leaves of Healing* quickly found their way to South Africa, which at the turn to the 20th century was a hot spot for foreign missionary activity from Europe and North America, especially the region around the Rand/Witwatersrand with its gold mining industry (since 1886) drawing crowds of people from all over the continent. Here Dowie's fourfold gospel-message resonated well with people of the Holiness Movement (Keswick Movement)²⁴ who were interested in faith healing, too (Faith Healing Movement).²⁵ Pieter Louis Le Roux (1864-1943), then a homeland missionary of the Dutch Reformed Church for Africans working on the farms, was one of them. LeRoux was so fascinated by what the *Leaves* communicated, that he left his former church for membership in the 'Christian Catholic Church in Zion' in South Africa after he and his wife were baptized – anew – along with numerous Africans by a deputy of J. A. Dowie in May 1904.²⁶ Shortly thereafter, on July 31st, 1904, Le Roux was ordained as 'Elder' (his wife as 'Evangelist') of that very church. This marks the beginning of Zionist churches in that region of the world and made J. A. Dowie become "the father of Christian Zionism" in Africa, too;²⁷ as seen, 'Zion in Africa' is still a qualifier in the names of many AIC bodies.

The significance of all of this, which shows that Zionism in southern Africa²⁸ antedates Pentecostalism by years, does not lie in the particular people or the church body involved. Le Roux and his wife kept changing their church affiliation afterwards again, and the 'Christian Catholic Church in Zion', Zion City, Illinois, fell apart years later. The events mentioned are

²¹ Harrell, *All Things are possible*, p.13.

²² See Cook, Philip L. *Zion City, Illinois: Twentieth-Century Utopia*. Syracuse [NY]: Syracuse University Press 1996.

²³ J. A. Dowie, Letter of April 16th, 1885, in: *Record of the International Conference on Divine Healing and True Holiness. Held at Agricultural Hall, London, June 1 to 5, 1885*. William E. Boardman, ed. London: J. Snow and Co. 1885, pp.171ff, and multiple times thereafter in *Leaves of Healing*.

²⁴ See Pollock, John C. *The Keswick Story—The Authorized History of the Keswick Convention*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964.

²⁵ See Chappell, Paul G. Origins of the Divine Healing Movement in America. In: *Spiritus: ORU Journal of Theology* 1985, 1(1), Article 3; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31380/2573-6345.1003>.

²⁶ See Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, pp. 13-67. A photograph of the baptism of LeRoux and his wife along with more than 100 Africans, *ibid.*, facing p. 48.

²⁷ Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches*. Leiden: Brill 1992, p. 2.

²⁸ Comprising the countries of Namibia, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, South-Africa, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), and Botswana.

significant insofar as they initialized the formation of ecclesiastical bodies other than the conventional models set by established European or American mission churches with their acceptance of race segregation, their emphasis on doctrine, and their rejection of polygamy, spirits, and witchcraft. All this never did, nor does it matter 'in Zion'. What matters 'in Zion' instead is (1) faithfulness to the 'Book', that is, the Bible as absolute authority, even though many cannot read it; (2) unconditional trust in Divine healing by refusing medical consultation and treatment; (3) holy living by abstaining from pork, alcohol, tobacco, and worldly pastimes like gambling or dancing; (4) adult baptism by at least three times full immersion in flowing waters; (5) no racial segregation; and (6) commitment to do 'the work of Zion' so to prepare the place for the Coming King. The latter implies establishing 'Zion' as the dwelling place of God on earth on the church premises, a very tricky issue, indeed, especially in the early years of the movement, because the South-African Natives Land Act of 1913, in force until the abolition of Apartheid in 1994, not only prevented Africans from buying plots, it made it also very difficult for them to get land on lease.²⁹

II – Worship, ritual practice, and congregational life 'in Zion'

Zionists anticipate the heavenly Zion in their services. They seek to experience salvation in the here and now. Worship is the time where the sons and daughters of Zion (*amaZioni*) escape from their daily troubles and get empowered to face life's challenges in the days ahead. That is why Zionist services are not bound by any consideration of time. They last for hours without the attendees getting bored³⁰ following a "ritual time"³¹ with lots of movement, dancing, clapping, chanting, and praying aloud. Even during the sermon there is much verbal applause and gesturing. Participating in a service is what Zionists call doing 'the work of Zion'.³² Doing the work of Zion is at the heart of their congregational life.

What at first glance might appear as an unordered, tumultuous gathering to outside observers has a structure though. The basic elements of any Zionist service are arranged according to a sequence adhered to almost everywhere. First comes the opening with chanted hymns and praise songs while elaborate confessional prayers simultaneously articulated aloud

²⁹ See Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, p. 33ff; G. C. Oosthuizen, *The Birth of Zionism*, p. 38f.

³⁰ "Nobody had been bored ... nor were there moments in the service which were hurried in order to get through with the business! Everything had its given time, and this was accepted by all." (Berglund, Axel I. *The Rituals of the Independent Church Movement and our Liturgy*. In: *Our Approach*, 12, p. 4)

³¹ Kiernan, Jim P. *The Production and Management of Therapeutic Power in Zionist Churches within a Zulu City*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press 1990, p. 102.

³² 'To do the work of Zion' is the technical phrase used by Zionists; see Kiernan, *The Production*. pp. 76, 153.

by those present follow second. A sermon of homiletic or catechetic nature by a preacher or the head of the church comes next before the service reaches its climax in the healing ceremony, which is the distinguishing characteristic of AICs Zionist type. Preaching “properly culminates in healing, while healing in the absence of preaching is rendered ineffectual.”³³ Bengt Sundkler, one of the first scholars taking serious interest in the study of Zionists, observed thus: “While the Roman Church is an Institute of Grace through its sacraments, and the Protestant Church in Africa appears as an Institute of the Word through teaching and preaching, the Independent Church, Zionist type, is an Institute of Healing. The Healing Message is the pivot of all Church activity.”³⁴

The importance of the common service for Zionists on Sundays, some of which observe Saturday as Sabbath, is emphasized by a dress code and some ritual preparation. When meeting for worship Zionists put on white robes, often adorned with colored sashes and/or other emblems, which differ from church to church and from rank to rank. They enter the building or the designated area under a tree or elsewhere in the open as their ‘Zion’ bare footed, since it is regarded a holy place. When entering a gate-keeper who normally is the leader of the congregation will give them their *isikhali* (Zulu: weapon), that is a plain wooden ‘holy staff’, sometimes a brazen stick (dependent on the rank), which they keep in hands throughout the service.³⁵ It is the gate-keeper, too, who has authority to restrict entry for anyone regarded unworthy on account of moral or health issues so to ensure that the effectiveness of doing Zion’s work does not get impaired or its power diminished³⁶, because an “individual’s illness has an effect on the whole group. ... The reason is that a person’s ‘messenger’ [i.e. spirit] is prone to being handicapped by other peoples’ illness. The Zionists speak of the weight of such illness”, which “is mystically communicated” while the “metaphor of weight is not necessarily restricted to sin.”³⁷ Ergo, only those considered sound in body and mind and who show moral integrity qualify for doing the work of Zion.

Most reports about healing ceremonies in Zionist churches, which vary from church to church, from congregation to congregation, even from individual to individual Prophet-Healer are anecdotal making it almost impossible to say anything of general validity here. Some reports, however, are just descriptive, avoiding observer interpretation overload. Axel I.

³³ Kiernan, *The Production*, p.153.

³⁴ Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, p. 220.

³⁵ See Dlamini, Isaak. Zionist Churches from the Perspective of a Zionist Church Leader. In: *Religion Alive*, p.209f.

³⁶ This includes also menstruating women. See Chimininge, *The Intersection of Culture and Health*, p.228.

³⁷ Dube, D. A. Search for abundant Life: Health, Healing and Wholeness in the Zionist Churches, in: *Afro-Christian Religion*, p.134.

Berglund, a vigilant eye-witness of the life of Zionists and their services has provided a description of one such ceremony, when attending a worship of the 'Zion Jerusalem Church of the Twelve Apostles in South Africa' in the district of Mapumulo, Natal, in 1965. His account deserves extensive citation for the benefit of better comprehending the matter in question even though it documents only one example of a Zionist healing activity. Berglund observed:

"The last part of the service is apparently the most important ... Ngema [the Prophet-Healer of said church] sits and takes his place in the middle of the floor inside a circle with four different signs marked in it. He carries with him his brass staff and having asked the congregation to rise, takes up a hymn. ... The drummer beats her instrument with much vigour and the sick and suffering find that their chance, their moment of healing, has arrived. ... [They] take their places in the circle. The congregation with their staffs in their right hands, start running around the sick in a clock-wise direction and at the end of each verse change the direction to an anti-clockwise movement; the staffs always held in such a way that they are carried in the hand facing towards the circle, the prophet and the sick."

"The prophet starts his act of healing with one of the women. He lifts her by the neck, stretches her upwards and shouts at the top of his voice: '*Puma dimone lokufa!*' [Zulu; Demon, get out! Die!]. He repeats the cry several times, rubs the woman up and down her neck, bangs her shoulders with great strength, and beats her on the back. He then tells her that she suffers from an inability to conceive and the woman starts weeping bitterly. He lets his hands pass down the length of her body and places it with a slap on her stomach, holds it there and then he starts a massage of no mild type. He tells her that a snake has been sent by an earlier lover. ... But his healing hand will help her and she is to return next Sunday for further prophetic treatment and then next month when the moon is growing, she will conceive. In this manner each one of those seeking help is dealt with, with the exception of the children, who are lifted up from the ground by the prophet by raising them and by holding them around the head ... To the mothers he gives the reasons for the children's illness and further instructions on how to behave so that they may get well again."

"Before the service closes, the prophet spits in the dish of ashes [placed on a table close to him] and places a little of the mixture on each of the foreheads of the sick, a little on the shoulders and such places of the body that are in need of healing. ... Each of the treated people puts a contribution on the prophet's table and he counts with the aid of the man on his right. The total sum is announced and blessings are called upon the money as this was now being used in

the correct way instead of being given for useless medicines at the local hospital. Concluding admonitions of not to buy medicines in future.”³⁸

This report rich in detail shows that the Zionist healing ritual within a service is not just an interaction between individuals, the Prophet-Healer and those seeking help. The congregation of those considered morally sound and healthy in body and mind is involved, too. Every *amaZioni* entitled to participate in the healing ritual has previously been installed as a Prayer-Healer (Zulu: *thandazo*, ‘one who prays’) who during the week also visits the sick at home to pray with them and offer help if need be.³⁹ The ministry of Prayer Healers is institutionalized as a Zionist office when they receive their *isikhali* for the first time. This staff is their key means for healing during the service. In the example given by Berglund the Prayer-Healers shield with their bodies the inner circle and transfer power to client and prophet in the center with their staff while their dancing in a circle intensifies the energetic atmosphere.⁴⁰

The most important Zionist office/ministry, however, is that of the Prophet-Healer, the *umprofethi* in Zulu. As the designation suggests, the Prophet-Healer has a dual function, that of diagnostician (prophetic ministry) and that of healer (healing ministry). Surprisingly though, male or female Prophet-Healers do not belong to the hierarchy of the church, and they do not preach.⁴¹ Preaching is left to pastors, bishops, overseers or their representatives. Rather, the task of Prophet-Healers is to diagnose and name ‘diseases’, advise for appropriate remedies, and console ‘patients’, a role assigned to them not just in services but at centers and shrines of healing, too.⁴² Prophet-Healers qualify for their ministry not by having mastered a systematic education but by either having been called in a vision/dream or by having recovered from a serious disease and/or from an extraordinary mental agony. Such unsought experiences, it is believed, endow people with the ‘power to see’ and communicate with the spirit world, which is so essential for any diagnostic activity and therapeutic advising. Once such calling shows off

³⁸ Berglund, Axel I. The Rituals. In: *Our Approach*, 12, p.3f.

³⁹ In addition to the publications by Sundkler, Oosthuizen and others already mentioned, see also West, Martin. *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City – African Independent Churches in Soweto, Johannesburg*. London and Cape Town: Phillip 1975, p.98f.

⁴⁰ It should be noted, however, that “one’s congregation plays a crucial role in any healing situation. Sinful members do not facilitate the working of the ‘spirit’ and they actually block healing from taking place.” (Mkhize, H. B. The Umthandazi Prayer Healer. In: *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing*, p.289). “Only the uninitiated (outsiders) and the unhealthy or inactive are excluded from participation in the healing circle.” (Kiernan, *The Production*, p.93f.)

⁴¹ Extensively on this topic Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. *The Healer-Prophet in Afro-Christian Churches*. Leiden: Brill 1992, passim, and Kiernan, *The Production*, p.151ff.

⁴² See Daneel, Martinus L. Life around the pool in African Independent Churches. In: *New Faces of Africa – Essays in honour of Ben (Barend Jacobus) Marais*, J. W. Hofmeyer, W. S. Vorster, eds., Pretoria: University of South Africa 1984, pp. 36-79. Becken, Hans-Jürgen. Ekuphakameni Revisited, pp. 161-172.

in successful treatments, and once the charisma is officially acknowledged by others, these individuals become a particular church's Prophet-Healer through baptism in the 'Jordan' (any river or stream in the neighborhood) by the bishop or head of that church. The more effective their healing ministry, the more people they draw into their church, people who otherwise would not come. It is the emphasis on healing which makes Zionist church membership attractive especially to people from traditional African religions, less so for members of the mission churches like Catholic or Protestant, even though some migration occurs. In general, Zionist churches do not grow by 'sheep stealing' as occasionally assumed⁴³, healing is "the most potent recruitment instrument in these churches".⁴⁴

Examining Ngema's procedure further, one notices that he did not do an anamneses nor did he ask the sick any question. Maybe he knew about their complaints before since Zionist congregations are normally comparatively small.⁴⁵ Whatever the case, Ngema, does not need doing that, because as a prophet he is seen as someone who is in contact with the spirit world, as is the case with any traditional diviner (*isangoma* in Zulu). He will be told by spirits – in this context it is assumed to be the Holy Spirit – what people are suffering from. He, thus, can declare up-front what is wrong and then powerfully exorcise the trouble causing demon not just by sternly commanding "at the top of his voice" the demon to leave, to die, but by touching, beating, and massaging the poor woman "in no mild way". How could his treatment be otherwise? He had to fight a demon after all! Children, however, did not have to suffer from his beating, even though Ngema's way of lifting them up from the ground and "holding them around the head" is putting them at risk for serious spine injury.

After finishing treatment of everyone seeking his help, Ngema spat into a dish of ashes (symbol of purified matter) and applied the mixture to his 'patients' forehead, shoulders and the spots of concern or pain, a procedure obviously analogous to what Jesus did to the man born

⁴³ "75% - 80% of Zionists ... joined the movement from animistic background." (Berglund, *The Rituals*, p. 6). "A statistical explanation for the extraordinary growth [of these churches of 116% during the decade 1970-1980] is not really possible. What can however be excluded is the unfounded notion that these groups grow through 'sheep-stealing' of members of the established Churches. Although a certain degree of membership transfer does occur it by no means explains all of the growth." (Kritzinger, Johan J. What the Statistics tell us about the African Indigenous Churches in South Africa. in: *Religion Alive*, p.260).

⁴⁴ Daneel, Martinus L. African Independent Church Pneumatology and the Salvation of all Creation. In: *International Review of Missions*, 1993, 82, p.142. "In a survey of the Shona prophetic movements an average of up to 60% of all the members interviewed indicated that faith-healing was a major factor which contributed to their seeking membership. ... An analysis of their testimonies clearly showed that they either considered themselves to have been healed or that they have observed this happen to a relative or acquaintance." (Daneel, *Life around the pool*, p. 94)

⁴⁵ "Although Zionist bands vary in size and attendance fluctuates, an average gathering would number 10-12 adults." (Kiernan, *The Production*, p.20, footnote 2).

blind according to John 9:6. His ‘patients’ give him some money in return as a token of their gratitude and get finally charged not to obtain other medicines, a charge not targeted primarily at bio-chemical drugs, but at indigenous ‘medicines’ (Zulu: *imithi*), which play a vital role in African life and especially in Bantu societies. The “substances ... spoken of in English as ‘medicines’ ... [do not have a] parallel concept ... in contemporary Western society. ‘Medicines’ in Africa [are wanted] to secure power, health, fertility, personality, or moral reform; they might be used to heal or deliberately to kill, to make a bride ‘patient and polite’ to her in-laws, a chief ‘majestic’, or a judge ‘compliant’ ... [They are] useful but horribly dangerous.”⁴⁶ The avoidance of anything resembling *imithi* / ‘medicine’ may also account for the general, almost complete absence of the use of oil in healing ceremonies as would be the expected practice according to biblical directive.⁴⁷ Instead, Zionists across the board tolerate only blessed/holy water (Zulu: *isiwasho*) to be used in their healing rites.

While decency cautions many Prophet-Healers to abstain from such palpable treatment as exercised by Ngema, the beating out of demons during exorcism and the laying-on of hands are a common practice among Zionists. Yet, beating and laying-on of hands are not the most common means, they rate only third as respective surveys show. Ritual vomiting and the external as well as internal cleansing of the sick by washing them with and making them drink blessed/holy water (*isiwasho*) top the list⁴⁸, a further indication of the all-important concern for purity ‘in Zion’. Other therapeutic means occasionally employed are inhalations, enemas, laxatives, ‘holy cords’ of different colors (Zulu: *ndaza*), flags, candles, and sometimes ‘Western medicine’, too.⁴⁹ As to be expected, different churches and different Prophet-Healers have different preferences; some use prayer only, while others rely on prayer and *isiwasho*, others still keep adding further paraphernalia to their therapeutic stock, provided these have nothing in common with any kind of *imithi*.

When the *amaZioni* do ‘the work of Zion’ they feel safe and protected thanks to the power residing there. But once they return their *isikhali* at the end of the service and leave ‘Zion’ unrobed, they plunge into a world full of danger facing threats of misfortune and disease. How to guard against harm in the worldly environment? To stay safe and protected while not ‘in Zion’ but living mainly in suburban slums populated by malicious spirits Zionists adhere to

⁴⁶ Wilson, Monica. *Religion and the Transformation of Society – A Study in Social Change in Africa*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1971, p. 34.

⁴⁷ See James 5:14.

⁴⁸ See Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. Baptism and Healing in African Independent Churches. In: *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing*, pp. 137-188.

⁴⁹ For a detailed account see Grundmann, *Leibhaftigkeit*, pp. 68-76.

a strict moral regimen. Surrounded by “brewing, drinking, gambling, profanity, promiscuity, sorcery and medicines”, they shun “every activity not directly related to work and worship and family life”.⁵⁰ Compliance with this code of conduct protects them from looming harm while any indolence puts them at risk of diminishing their life’s power and wellbeing. “If a Zionist allows himself to be caught up in outside associations and if he does so out of defiance or even through negligence, his membership [sc. in Zion] is clearly wavering. Until his exact position is established through divination [by a Zionist Prophet-Healer], the membership of a sick person, even of a sick prophet, is held in abeyance and he is debarred from exercising office and joining in Zionist work. ‘He has lost his power’ is the common explanation.”⁵¹ Thus, Zionists adherence to strict moral standards is not just motivated by a preoccupation with purity⁵², it is also aroused by the fear of losing vital power.

III – Comprehending the phenomenon

AICs in southern Africa, especially those of the Zionist type can be understood as group attempts by marginalized populations to cope with the clash of cultural practices of indigenous rural societies with the daily challenges of technocratic urbanization. These attempts have led to a mushrooming of very diverse entities, all of which concerned with ‘healing’ the disintegrating effects of that clash and help people stay sound and healthy. In this capacity they function as not to be underestimated autotherapeutic self-help groups, which complement the health-care systems of their countries, an aspect deserving further in-depth study and statistical corroboration.⁵³

This prompts the question what ‘healing’ stands for in Zionist churches, because as a broadly used general term the meaning of ‘healing’ fluctuates between ‘feeling better’ to ‘coping’ to being ‘restored to health’ (*restitutio ad integrum*), or the ‘*status quo ante*’ respectively in the strict medical sense.⁵⁴ For discerning claim and actual outcome it is crucial

⁵⁰ Tutu, Desmond. Foreword. In: *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots - Its Dynamics and Struggles*, Gerhardus C. Oosthuizen, M. C. Kisthoff, S. W. D. Dube, eds., Leiden: Brill 1994, p. vii.

⁵¹ J. P. Kiernan, *The Production*, p.160f.

⁵² The concern for purity also informs their perception and praxis of baptism, which in many Zionist churches is seen to be a repeatable purification rite rather than a sacrament. For an extensive discussion see Grundmann, *Leibhaftigkeit*, pp.164-172.

⁵³ An epidemiology of religion research approach seems to be the most promising. See *The Link between Religion and Health: Psychoimmunology and the Faith Factor*, Koenig, Harold G., H. J. Cohen, eds., New York: Oxford University Press 2002; Koenig, Harold G. *Faith and Mental Health: Religious Resources for Healing*, Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 2005. See also Gunderson, Gary R., J. R. Cochrane, Religious Health Assets: What Religion Brings to Health of the Public, in: *Religion and the Health of the Public. Shifting the Paradigm*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2012, pp. 41-58.

⁵⁴ For an extensive discussion of this topic see Grundmann, *Leibhaftigkeit*, pp. 128-137.

to qualify the term more precisely, a task which taps into the field of medicine and the healing arts, especially into that of ethnomedicine, a sub-discipline of medical anthropology.⁵⁵ “For researchers in clinical medicine, healing is an embarrassing word” since it “exposes the archaic roots of medicine and psychiatry, roots usually buried under the biomedical science facade of modern health care” raising “questions that deal with human values, and meanings not easily reduced to technical problems that can be answered with simple biological explanations.”⁵⁶ That is why the term is rarely used in medical circles, save when speaking of the ‘healing’ of wounds or the ‘defective’, only partial ‘healing’ of a condition. However, when studying indigenous healing systems and their agents, ‘healing’ figures prominent.

Irrespective of their naming in different cultures – *shaman*, *medicine-man*, *isangoma* – the help of such male, oftentimes female ‘doctors’ is sought whenever people experience serious physical, mental, or social difficulties. These professionals are then consulted to diagnose a ‘disease’ by naming it, to advise on the remedy, and, sometimes, to also ‘treat’ patients. As experts of communication with the spirit world they can do so, at times, even without the suffering individual present.⁵⁷ They facilitate ‘healing’ by helping their clients regain orientation and find meaning in a time of crisis when chaos shows by conversing with the spirits and communicating the spirits directives within a plausibility structure which is shared by healer and clients/patients. The quasi-logotherapeutic ability to meaningfully situate a disturbing happening within the frame of an established worldview is what brings ‘healing’ about in Zionist churches and what accounts for successful treatments. “Providing effective treatment for disease is not the chief reason why indigenous practitioners heal. To the extent that they provide culturally legitimated treatment of illness, they *must* heal.”⁵⁸ To call this ‘faith healing’ as done occasionally, is missing the point.

The Zionist Prayer-Healer (*umprofethi*) functions in the same way as the traditional Zulu diviner, albeit within a frame of reference shaped by modern outside influence. Discerning a Zionist Prophet-Healer from a traditional diviner (*isangoma*) or witchdoctor (*nganga*), Zionists hold that “Prophets go to church, pray and use holy water, whereas diviners use traditional

⁵⁵ See Kleinman, Arthur. *Patients and Healers in the Context of Culture*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press 1980; Willem, Jean-Pierre *L’Ethnomédecine, une alliance entre science et tradition*, Paris: Jouvence & Biocontact 2006; Lee, Roberta, M. J. Balick, *Ethnomedicine: Ancient Wisdom for Contemporary Healing*. In: *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, 2001, 7(3), pp.28–30. See also *Journal of Ethnobiology and Ethnomedicine* at <https://ethnobiomed.biomedcentral.com/>.

⁵⁶ A. Kleinman, *Patients and Healers*, p.312.

⁵⁷ See *The Traditional Medical Practitioner in Zimbabwe*, Gelfand Michael et al., eds., Gweru: Mambo Press 1985, p.9.

⁵⁸ Kleinman, *Patients and Healers*, p.362; original emphasis.

herbs, bones and killing medicine [*imithi*]].⁵⁹ The Zionist Prayer-Healer is called by the Holy Spirit (Zulu: *uMoya*) and, thus, enabled to converse with the spirits of ancestors and of the world around. “The Holy Spirit called me but He sends my ancestors as messengers” is an often heard phrase when Prayer-Healers are asked about their work.⁶⁰ ‘In Zion’ the *umprofethi* fight against the ‘spirits of affliction’ evoked by the clash between old and new, like for instance the spirits of migrant workers killed in an accident or of old people dying in urban isolation and buried without the customary burial rites by which they would have been ‘brought home’ into the fold of family and clan. Their spirits roam and cause harm when looking for a new place to rest by getting into people and families, because unlike “the ‘traditional’ spirits, who remain external to man, these [modern] spirit manifestations [called *amandiki* in Zulu, *shave* in Shona] are believed to actually possess the individual, by entering into his very body”⁶¹ where they trigger ‘diseases’ and impairments needing prophetic treatment by exorcism. Tending to these complaints, Zionist Prayer-Healers become “sources of spiritual and moral rearmament” and “the support of a new identity yet to be discovered, which allies the old and the new” while their church is that “therapeutic institution” which “creates an identifying frontier vis-à-vis a global society which is in distress.”⁶²

This “therapeutic milieu”⁶³ of AICs Zionist type is attractive to those who feel threatened by the spirits and powers of the modern times but do not know how to keep them under control. Providing space for managing their diffuse anxieties ‘in Zion’ by employing redefined elements of indigenous cultures and creatively blending these with fragments of the holiness and faith-healing traditions of nineteenth century European/North American Christianity accounts for the mass appeal to the grassroots⁶⁴ which, by the way, makes these congregations also become increasingly interesting to agencies promoting public healthcare,

⁵⁹ Wessels, Wessel H. Healing Practices in the African Independent Churches. In: *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing*, p.94.

⁶⁰ Oosthuizen. *The Healer-Prophet*, p.68. See Hammond-Tooke, William D. The Aetiology of Spirit in Southern Africa. In: *Afro-Christian Religion and Healing*, pp.47-66; Mostert, J. P. Men of ‘The Spirit’ - or of ‘Spirit’? In: *Religion Alive*, pp.82-89.

⁶¹ Hammond-Toke, *The Aetiology*, p.54.

⁶² Mbonyinkebe, Sebahire. Healing through faith? The Afro-Christian Churches. In: *Pro Mundi Vita*, Africa Dossier 1987, 42(3), p.22. – Aylward Shorter speaks of Zionist churches as “therapeutic communities” (Shorter, Aylward. *Jesus and the Witchdoctor*. London: G. Chapman/Maryknoll: Orbis 1985, p.186).

⁶³ Kleinman, *Patients and Healers*, p.370f.

⁶⁴ “Their [sc. the Zionist churches’] phenomenal growth is traceable to the successful and effective preferment of solutions to members’ existential problems.” (Chimininge, p.227); see also Meyer, Christianity in Africa, p. 452; Kitshoff, Michiel C. African Independent Churches - A Mighty Movement in A Changing South Africa. In: *South Africa International*, Johannesburg, 1991 21(3), pp.155-164.

developmental, even political agendas for pushing their goals.⁶⁵ This is yet one other dimension of the phenomenon requiring more rigorous research.

Besides examining the role of church functionaries and of the socio-therapeutic contribution cultural anthropologists have also been studying Zionists' creative amalgamation of the traditional and modern by looking at some of the paraphernalia they employ.⁶⁶ Taking the *isikhali*, the 'holy staff' as an example. This is not just any stick picked by chance. For Bantus the 'holy staff' is laden with symbolic meaning. "Invariably, it [the *isikhali*] must be from 'a tree growing beside the water', a description which strongly evokes reed symbolism"⁶⁷ signifying the origin of humans. "We men come out of a bed of reeds. ... [T]he first being ... broke off the nations from the reed."⁶⁸ Reeds represent life and fertility in an oftentimes arid environment making people speak of *umhlanga*, that is of a 'bushel of reeds' when referring to their progenitors. This myth of origin translates to the entrance rite of Zionists, too, when they congregate for worship and receive their *isikhali* from the gatekeeper to whom they hand it back when leaving. They thereby are again and again reminded of where they truly belong to.

On yet another level the *isikhali* is also a 'weapon', as the Zulu term indicates. It represents the sole and only device of the 'guardians of the heavens' with which they are expected to protect dwellings and Kraals from looming harm by heavy weather. When such weather is drawing near, the guardians are called for and told "The cattle are going into the fields!"⁶⁹ Their task is to keep thunder, winds, and downpouring rain at bay like shepherds who prevent their flock from getting into fields and gardens. With the staff in their hand pointing heavenwards, the guardians go out to argue with the 'Lord-of-the-Skys' to calm down and do no harm. As a strong weapon of protection against evil Zionists integrated the use of *isikhali* in their services from early on⁷⁰, adding further layers of meaning in the course of time by alluding

⁶⁵ *Apostolic Religion, Health and Utilization of Maternal and Child Health Services in Zimbabwe*. Collaborating Centre for Operational Research and Evaluation, New York: UNICEF 2011; Chimininge, The Intersection, pp. 227-249; Öhlmann. *Potentials of Cooperation*, p.11; Tarusarira, J. B., P. Humbe. The Ambivalence of African Independent/Initiated Churches in Colonial and Postcolonial Politics. In: *Religion in Rebellions, Revolutions, and Social Movements*, Goldstein, W. S., J.-P. Reed, eds., Routledge 2022, pp. 158-172.

⁶⁶ See Daneel, Martinus L. *Old and New in Southern Shona*, 2 vols., The Hague/Paris: Mouton 1971/1974, vol 3 Gweru: Mambo Press 1988; Daneel, Martinus L. *Quest for Belonging - Introduction to a study of African Independent Churches*. Mambo Press, Gweru 1987; Kiernan, Jim P., The Social Stuff of Revelation: Pattern and Purpose in Zionist Dreams and Visions. In: *Africa, Journal of the International Institute of African Language and Cultures*, London 1985, 55, pp.304-317; Kiernan, Jim P., *The Production*; Johnson, M. P., Called to be: *Isangoma* or Prophet, in: *Afro-Christianity at the Grassroots*, pp.165-179.

⁶⁷ Kiernan, *The Production*, p.114.

⁶⁸ Kiernan, *The Production*, p.115.

⁶⁹ Kiernan, *The Production*, p.117.

⁷⁰ See Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, p.49.

to scriptural parallels⁷¹ and by decorating the staff with colored laces and cords, sometimes topping it with symbols of power, or by replacing a wooden *isikhali* with a brazen, a copper, or even a silver-plated one, which, of course, entails a significant shift in meaning away from representing vitality and power towards hierarchical status and authority.⁷² In whatever way the ‘holy staff’ is made, it is and remains a powerful personal item, which in case of death will also be buried at the funeral along with its owner, or it will be broken into pieces in case of excommunication.⁷³ But unlike cultural convention according to which the staff “is a symbol not only of the fathers’ presence but also of his virility – a masculine symbol not carried by women”,⁷⁴ women do the ‘work of Zion’ with their own *isikhali* as a sign of the new order reigning ‘in Zion’.

One last area in which the Zionists’ creative *mélange* of traditional culture with modern elements can be studied is the religio-theological one. Like other AICs Zionists too claim to be ‘church’. In the initial phase of their history, they were looked at disdainfully by members of mainline churches who labeled them ‘syncretistic’, ‘post Christian’ or ‘schismatic’. They were accused of neo-paganism and treated as politically suspect. Only slowly was it recognized that they represent a unique type of church, a church in its own right as South-African Anglican Bishop Desmond Tutu (1931-2021), himself a Xhosa Bantu, frankly admitted: “I remember so very well how we in the so-called ‘main-line’ churches looked down disdainfully at the odd phenomenon called independent or indigenous churches. After all were their ministers not nearly all of them illiterate persons heading up churches (often no more than fragmentary minute congregations) with usually rather preposterous names and what was this odd mix of clearly pagan beliefs and practices which so obviously condemned them all as syncretistic – the ultimate heresy we had been led to believe? And they were not even churches, but mere sects at best with hardly any decent theology between them all ... Our churches had tended to scorn the healing ministry as it turned out very much to our cost.”⁷⁵ Likewise the Swedish bishop and former missionary in South Africa Bengt Sundkler who heralded the study of AICs. He interpreted Zionism first as a neo-pagan phenomenon but later saw that “the Independent

⁷¹ Ex. 4:2-5, Nu. 21:6-9 and Eph. 6:11-17 besides others.

⁷² Oosthuizen, *The Healer-Prophet*, p.61f; Becken, H.-J. *Theologie der Heilung*, pp.74,198,237,257; West, Martin. *Bishops and Prophets*, p.99.

⁷³ See Oosthuizen. *The Healer-Prophet*, p.62; Sundkler. *Bantu Prophets*, p.215.

⁷⁴ Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. *Afro-Christian Religions*. Leiden: Brill 1979, p.13.

⁷⁵ Tutu, Desmond. Foreword, p. vii.

Churches have much to contribute to the treasure-house of the Church Universal.”⁷⁶ But what and in which way?

The specific contribution of Zionists to the Church Universal does not consist in adding new elements to the essential notions of the Church (*notae ecclesiae*). The sacraments – the Eucharist especially – play only a marginal role for Zionists if any at all⁷⁷, and Baptism has been reinterpreted as a repeatable purification and re-empowerment rite.⁷⁸ Nor does their contribution lie in the realm of theological studies since Zionists barely have the ability to read the scriptures despite the fact that the Bible occupies a dominant place in their rituals as that ‘Book’, which reveals everything about Zion. As such they sometimes use the Bible in straightforward magical fashion when placing it upon the sick to bring about healing or when pouring ‘holy water’ (*isiwasho*) over it to absorb the power of the Word of God.⁷⁹ Rather, the unique contribution of African Zionists to the Church Universal rests in (1) their challenge to take the corporeality of salvation seriously by actively engaging in healing, and (2) by their emphasis on the life sustaining power of the Holy Spirit (Zulu: *uMoya*; *uMoya ongcwele*).

As seen, Zionists do not delegate the healing ministry to institutions. In their services they provide on a regular basis a therapeutic milieu by creating an energetic atmosphere for healing when dancing around in a circle at the center of which their Prophet-Healer communicates with the spirits, showing off the power of the Holy Spirit. All members of the congregation judged sound in body and mind are actively involved in enhancing the healing power while at the same time getting reenergized by benefitting from the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit in their midst. Such emphasis on the presence of the Holy Spirit (*uMoya*) has led missiologists to assume, that the “specific contribution of these churches will indeed be to force us [sc. in the mainline churches] to reconsider the whole work of the Third Person of the Trinity. ... [A]ll dealing with the so-called *Amabandla Omoya* [*amabandla uMoya*, the ‘Churches of the Spirit’, i.e. the AICs over against the established mainline churches, the ‘Churches of the Law’] will force us to ask ourselves what existentially we do know and expect of the living power of the Holy Spirit today! As the church is borne and vivified by the Holy

⁷⁶ Sundkler, *Zulu Zion*, p.7. - Referring to his previous study *Bantu Prophets* he stated: “I had interpreted the syncretistic group – ‘nativistic Zionism’ – as the bridge over which Africans are brought back to that traditional religion from which they had once emerged.” (p.305f)

⁷⁷ See Sundkler, *Bantu Prophets*, p.215; West, *Bishops and Prophets*, p.175; Kiernan, *The Production*, p.127.

⁷⁸ See Oosthuizen, Gerhardus C. Baptism in the Context of African Independent Churches. In: *Afro-Christian Religion*, pp. 137-188.

⁷⁹ For a detailed discussion of this aspect see Grundmann, *Leibhaftigkeit*, pp.158-164.

Spirit, the question of the survival of the Church in Africa is indeed at stake in this encounter with the self-conscious ‘Churches of the Spirit’.”⁸⁰

However, when Zionists speak of the Holy Spirit (*uMoya*), they are less concerned about trinitarian doctrine or about the ‘gifts of the Spirit’ such as speaking in tongues or resting in the Spirit according to 1. Cor. 12. Zionists, rather, perceive *uMoya* as the ultimate source of power and life. Surrounded by the activity of malicious spirits they trust that the protective power of the Holy Spirit will strengthen them not to get harmed by the wickedness of those immaterial, but lively beings which attempt to hurt them and stain their purity. Proclaiming and trusting that *uMoya* is the superabundant power of life is the basis of all Zionist activity and symbolism. This not only appeals to people longing for enhancement and longevity, but also to those who are socially and economically marginalized, because *uMoya* “provides a potent counterbalance to the realities of” their “existential situation. ... [T]he very marginality that these groups experience is transformed into a benefit. Their theology explains and justifies their marginal position in terms both of salvation and of meaningfulness in the here and now. It is precisely their marginality to the centers of secular power that provides the true power that comes from on high.”⁸¹

Conclusion

From whatever perspective AICs Zionist type are studied they show an impressive creative mix of diverse elements mingling the old with new, the traditional with the modern, the rural with the urban, and, also, Christian beliefs with non-Christian ones. Zionists do this not just by accident but in response to dramatic changes of their socio-cultural environment to manage existential survival and stay well and sound in body and mind. The ritual means they have devised ‘in Zion’ and the paraphernalia they employ have proven to be of help to many of their fellow strugglers at the grassroots of society. Ultimately, Zionist Churches in southern Africa can be understood as embodied, lived theologies of survival. Their fusion of spirit, suffering, and sociality does not merely fill the void left by societal, urban dislocation — it generates alternative epistemologies, rooted in ancestral memory and spiritual power, which resist socio-political marginalization and defy biomedical reductionism. In Zion, people are not only healed; they get re-situated within a cosmos of meaning. The prophetic work of healing, the

⁸⁰ Beyerhaus, Peter. The African Independent Church Movement as Missionary Challenge. In: *Our Approach*, 1, p.4.

⁸¹ Hammond-Tooke, William. D. *The Aetiology of Spirit*, p.62f.

choreography of communal ritual, and the moral rigour of daily life converge into a lived cosmology that makes the invisible visible and the excluded central. These churches do not seek recognition by the religious establishment; rather, they perform a counter-establishment from below — one that integrates where modernity offers fragmentation, and they offer lively breath (uMoya) where institutions offer tested structure. While their message is not coherent, it is to be heard: healing is meaning becoming corporeal.

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