

Chapter 6 The Case of Isaiah Shembe Tim Callaway

Chapter Summary

This chapter deals with problems encountered by scholars attempting to study primal religions. It examines the major scholarly literature as well as some traditions surrounding perceptions of the Zulu religious leader Isaiah Shembe. More books have been written about him and his followers than about any other modern religious movement in Africa.

As already noted, one of the justifications for the reintroduction of the slave trade in the sixteenth century was the claim that Africans were not truly human because they lacked a soul. The argument was developed via the claim that Africans had failed to develop anything like Buddhism or Hinduism and that African society lacked all manifestations of religion. If Africans lacked religion, it was argued, they must not have a soul and were therefore not fully human. Later, Africans were said to be lower on the evolutionary tree and nearer to apes than to Europeans.

The claim that Africans lacked religion justified their exploitation by slavery and colonialism. Some Christian missionaries vigorously challenged such conclusions. Henry Callaway, for example, tried to explain the apparent lack of religion among Africans by attempting to find a High God behind African mythologies/ways of thinking. This chapter argues that both attitudes are wrong and distort the reality of African religion.

African Independent Churches and other religious movements were initially called "Ethiopian." In the 1930s "Independent Churches" came to refer to such groups whether or not they were Christian. An essentially hostile attitude remained toward these movements such as that reflected in John Buchan's best-selling novel *Prester John* (1910). Such movements were viewed by colonial administrators as cunning attempts by blacks to organize politically under the guise of religion.

British missionary leaders argued that African religious movements, unlike "true Christian Churches," did not convert the heathen but led Christians astray by condoning witchcraft and polygamy. Black Africans, many concluded, were incapable of developing a genuine interest in true religion.

Several scholars in the mid-1900s slowly turned the tide of academic opinion in favor of taking African religions seriously. G. C. Oosthuizen attempted a new interpretation of African Independent Churches in his controversial book *The Theology of a South African Messiah*, arguing that Shembe had produced "a Zuluized religion" with his amaNazarite movement. Writers like Bengt Sundkler and Absolom Vilakazi countered that Oosthuizen misunderstood both Zulu language and society, claiming that Shembe's church was "unapologetically Zulu" and Christian!

It is very important to understand the method Oosthuizen employed to reach his conclusions. Although he wrote in a style more appropriate for the discussion of literary texts, he was actually more dependent on informants than on written documents and he expected his readers to understand such. Shembe's son and grandson both preferred Oosthuizen's representation of the amaNazarite movement to the views of Sundkler and Vilakazi. Even so,

Shembe's son believed Shembe had founded an entirely new form of Christianity distinct from existing churches, whereas his grandson believed he had founded an entirely new form of African religion.

Hexham argues it is imperative to make allowance for a religion to develop over a period of time and that the conflicting perspectives of the scholars noted above might best be understood by recognizing that they analyzed the amaNazarite movement in different decades. Hexham's own study related to understanding the amaNazarite movement identifies the key role that primal experiences play in the formation of its beliefs and practices.

Shembe's own grandson abandoned a highly successful law practice to become a religious leader following three intense visionary dreams in which he believed the elder Shembe reached out to pull him into the office of prophet. This compelled him to lead the amaNazarites even at risk to his own life. The role of myths in his life enabled him to continually interpret and reinterpret his primal experiences in terms of the group's own traditions. This process of interpretation created and continues to create new myths.

The two younger Shembes could not really say whether Isaiah Shembe's amaNazarite movement was an authentic expression of African Christianity or a syncretic cult merging African beliefs with Christianity to the detriment of both. They did acknowledge a historic debt to Christianity yet took diverse approaches in providing leadership for the movement.

The majority of religious studies scholars concentrate on religions of the written word. In attempting to study African religions that are of a primal orientation, however, we face a different task since they are primarily based upon dynamic oral traditions that involve the ongoing interpretation of primal experiences. Therefore, it is essential that we develop and use different tools in attempting to understand such religions.