

THE SOCIO-POLITICAL ROLE OF HEALING CHURCHES IN SOUTH AFRICA¹

by

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This will be a short historical appraisal of the healing churches in South Africa, using Bhengu's Church, which flourished in the 1950s, as a case study. Within this historical analysis, we will see the social conditions for the development of healing churches. The essay concludes with an evaluation of the African churches in South Africa and the political situation as to whether they are an agent of change or of accommodation.

There are over 2200 churches in South Africa that are called "independent" because they are not under the control of white religious groups. More than the gross number of these churches, the rapidity with which they were formed gives them their extraordinary character. The overwhelming majority of them are fundamentalist, and hardly any of them are recognized by the Government.

This proliferation of fundamentalist churches was preceded by the "Ethiopian Movement" which began in the last quarter of the 19th century. African church leaders seceded from European mission churches and founded their own churches. In these churches, they continued the ritual and doctrine they knew in their mission churches. Bengt Sundkler has called these churches "Ethiopian" after an early church called The Ethiopian Church.²

The fundamentalist movement began in the first decades of the 20th century, while the orthodox church was still perpetuating itself in breakoffs from mission churches and secessions within itself. In this second step, churches emerged with syncretic and fundamentalist content. Sundkler calls these churches "Zionist" after an early church that had "Zion" in its title. These Zionist and Messianic churches in South Africa are characterized by syncretism, speaking with pentacostal tongues, and healing. The words "Zion", "Pentacostal", "Faith", or "Apostolic" are generally somewhere in their titles. They unanimously agree that European churches are apostate, with false prophets bearing "doctrines of devils." These categories of Ethiopian and Zionist are arbitrary. Many of these churches have both Ethiopian and Zionist features. Nevertheless, the classification distinguishes two interdependent parts of a process whereby African independent churches were formed.

Fundamentalist churches had emerged over a period of time in Europe and America where white (and, in America, black) Christians reacted to the materialist orientation in their industrializing societies. There is the tendency wherever modern Christianity has been planted for movements to arise that essentially offer techniques to people to reorder their lives: they call upon the sinner to give up old ways and come into something new. In South Africa, some of the churches that seceded from Ethiopian churches had fundamentalist

characteristics on the periphery, but such teachings were embodied from the beginning in newly-created churches. The adoption of fundamentalist doctrine occurred in conjunction with an increase in church membership for the entire independent movement. This increase can be linked directly to social forces operating in the society. South Africa was beginning to develop secondary industry. At the same time, the Africans were being restricted to smaller areas of land through the Land Act of 1913.

Throughout the world, commercial activity caused an accelerated movement of people from self-contained, parochial societies into the larger, industrializing world. Forces within this larger world created the alienation and enslavement of labor. In South Africa, *apartheid* legislation has totally alienated African labor. It is explicitly admitted that African labor only exists for the production of white prosperity. The ruling class has the myth that Africans are a natural-born race of servants, yet the rulers must go to great lengths to enforce this. The social conditions that result from this disfiguration of millions of people cause great hardship. The healing churches are responding to what this must mean for the Africans within the Republic. It is fair to say that the Church has been one social institution responding to wretched conditions.

Christianity accompanied the European colonial systems, but there is nothing about Christianity itself which leads to great numbers of converts. Secular forces were responsible for conversion, as these demanded a transcending of traditional, small-scale societies. Small-scale societies are based on what Horton has called "typical traditional cosmology."³ This cosmology is based on the assumption that personal forces sustain the life and strength of the social group.

To illustrate this, let us consider the religious system of the Zulu.⁴ In the repertoire of Zulu beliefs there is a supreme being, *Unkulukulu*, and lesser beings, the ancestral spirits, *amaThongo*. *Unkulukulu* (the old, old one) is the Creator. He was the first man to come out of "the bed of reeds." *Unkulukulu* is not worshipped, "for he is said to have died so long ago that no one knows his praises, and as he left no progeny, no one can worship him." Although *Unkulukulu* instituted the traditional order, giving all men all things, he is only vaguely referred to, as are the other higher spiritual beings known to the Zulu.

Much more elaborate theories exist about the lesser beings, the *amaThongo*, who are important in the everyday life of the society. They are the deceased elder members of the lineage. They were known in this life and continue after death to take an interest in, and affect the lives of their juniors.⁵ When a man has been made sick by an *iThongo*, his kinsmen approach the *iThongo*, propitiating through ritual, calling-off the *iThongo* so that health can be restored. The ritual is always a kin-group affair, with the oldest living member officiating because he is in direct descent to the *amaThongo*.

The *amaThongo* were responsible for life within a compacted causal context. Rapid social change occurred with colonial conquest. This change existed outside the kin-based social and political structures and their supportive world-view. A progressive conversion to Christianity occurred when the traditional gods failed once the traditional structures had been made obsolete.⁶

It turned out though that Christianity, as brought to Africa, was also insufficient. The missionaries preached that it was a replacement for the old religions, and a source of strength for living in a changing world. But Christianity is not a technique for explaining and manipulating the world (outside of how it is used against slave populations). It had already lost that feature, being as it is at the center of a world based on what Horton calls "impersonal theoretical idiom,"⁷ as distinct from the personal idiom of traditional societies. Modern science created what Alfred Whitehead called "the bifurcation of nature," whereby reality is dichotomized into an inner and outer experience.⁸ In this mode of thought, the experimental technique became the only valid method. Facts are experimented with and technology is developed, and the result is a "crass materialism."⁹

In the process, God, Jesus, and lesser beings became impersonalized and ceased to have theoretical relevance. Science, and not religion, was made the basis for explaining, predicting and controlling social forces. The Church, drawing from the material world at various degrees, has no room in it, at its most established levels, for seers and faith-healers. These are to be found at the bottom of the Christian society, along with fundamentalist churches. Throughout the century, there has been a proliferation of healing churches in South Africa. One such church was begun by Nicholas Bhengu in East London in the 1950s. This church has its own particular features. The other churches on which there is a fair amount of information, are Shembe's church¹⁰ and two others in the rural and urban areas.¹¹ Distinct from these, Bhengu's church will be looked at in conjunction with the urban setting at East London in the Transkei, during the 1950s and 1960s.¹²

In this way, we can look more closely at the way in which social disorganization affects the life of the individual. The urban setting has more stress-producing stimuli in it than does the rural setting. In the reserves, although the land cannot support life, nevertheless in some sections the family structure and other social networks had a greater chance to endure than in the cities.

People from the rural areas who have come to urban areas and try to continue old social network patterns, find the basis for these patterns increasingly eroded. Ten years after his study of East London, Mayer noted that the new location, Mdantsane, was being built with single-sex hostels, therefore excluding the possibility of kin or clan members being the basis for social relations.

There had always been a two-way flow of movement between the reserves and urban areas, with many of the people remaining in the cities. In 1955, 86% of the town-dwelling adult Xhosa were of rural origin. Within this group two categories, "Red" and "School," described South African-style class categories within the African population. The Xhosa and Zulu had institutionalized traditionalism as a force against the encroaching settlers.¹³ This institutionalization created these two opposing cultural groups, involving the whole population in both the cities and hinterlands. As late as 1960, it was estimated that over half of the Xhosa society was still traditionalist.

These traditionalists are called "Red" people because it is their custom to smear their bodies with red ochre to beautify themselves. Their allegiance to traditional culture is morally justified. If they leave, the ancestral spirits will have no more to do with them. The traditionalists are trying to preserve the integrity of their culture, even though foreign domination and urbanization erode this integrity to a considerable extent. It is interesting that the ruling class has co-opted this idea of preserving culture by its policy of multinationalism (the latest euphemism for *apartheid*).

The "School" people are found in the rural areas as well as in the towns. In the country, the division between themselves and the "Reds" shows up more clearly because the "Reds" take off their Western work clothes and put on their traditional garments. The "School" people's adaptation to Western culture is one of degree. They can be adapted with either a rural or urban orientation. In addition, they do not necessarily have to be Christian to be westernized.

Besides rural "School" people coming to settle in urban areas (in African locations, of course), there are the people who have been born and raised in town. A proportion of these people make up the African middle-class. They earn their living in bureaucratic positions, professions, and private enterprise. Class can be defined by one's possessions, in this case, or by one's values. For aspirants to the African middle-class, membership in an orthodox church would demonstrate their social values. It is this small, budding middle-class that is more exempt from endorsement out of the cities as almost all of the Africans living there are being classified as "temporary sojourners."

A much larger division of the town-based population is called *tsotsi*. At different times, this class has various descriptions, but the name suggests that it is the criminal element in the cities. Its members are the product of one-parent families, poverty, and unemployment. Some members, comparatively, have had considerable education.¹⁴ Others are "Red" people whose transition to urban life is via a *tsotsi* gang.

This is the setting in which Nicholas Bhengu emerged. He was born in Zululand in 1909, the son and brother of Lutheran ministers.¹⁵ He was active in the Communist Party of South Africa and the Industrial and Commercial Union and held a Government post prior to his conversion

in 1938 at a revival service of the American-based, Full Gospel Church. After his conversion, he was affiliated with various churches, including the Roman Catholics, the Sabbatarians, and the Salvation Army. In 1950, he joined the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal mission church based in the United States. He joined because he was convinced of the power of prayer. Shortly afterward he had his own following.

In the beginning, revival services were a prominent feature of Bhengu's Church. People publically confessed their sins at these mass meetings. The Church boasted of the uniqueness of *tsotsi* confessing their sins (crimes) and giving up their stolen goods, which Bhengu then turned over to the police. Some of these repenters joined his Church.

Most of the other converts who joined the Church did so because of the healing which they received. In the early 1950s, Bhengu's Church was known as the "Healer's Church" (*icawe kamphilisi*) and his fame spread beyond East London where the Church (also known as the Assembly) was founded. About fifty assemblies were started through his crusade, with memberships ranging from thirty to 15,000. Bhengu emphasized to those who sought his help that it was their belief in God which made healing possible. He also said he was offering a technique greater than ancestral blessings (*impundulu*), preaching that "the spirits of the ancestors may indeed be watching your steps, though they are subject to God."

A survey of a Sunday service showed that twenty-nine percent of the congregation was of "Red" origin, with a higher proportion of men than is usually found in independent churches, with the exception of the early-formed orthodox churches on the Rand. A little over half of this twenty-nine percent was from the reserves, the rest came from European farms. Their level of education was reported to be higher than that of the "Red" population cross-sectionally. The conversion rate for "Red" people exceeded that of any other church, but these were not migrants with secure roots in the country, for reasons already cited.

The people who tended to join were already disassociated from old networks and ties. This was especially true for farm laborers and widows. Their former ties were no longer meaningful once they were converted, and this was particularly the case of the *tsotsi*. The Church offered new relationships. Bhenguists, as the members are called, tend to live together in sectarian fashion. Dubb reports that it had not been Bhengu's intention to start churches, but confronting "heretics" caused the evangelists to band together. Social and recreational life takes place within the Church. This is true of a good number of other churches too.

Another trait Bhengu's Church shares with others in the Republic, is its emphasis on thrift, stressing the importance of education and an industrial life. That is taught along with the Bible. The members are taught that God's power is represented by strictly following rules of behavior.

Many of the members have a strong missionary fervor, evangelizing on the streets early in the morning when people are leaving for work. This probably stems from their use of the Gospel (New Testament) for much of their teachings. Other churches rely more on the Old Testament, especially on prophecy, and the story of the Hebrew people's plight. Those churches are also inclined to have more elements from the traditional belief pattern. Bhengu, on the other hand, has drawn most of his concepts from the Western world.

Bhengu stopped healing in the late 1950s. Apparently he always saw it as incidental. For instance, Dubb reports that Bhengu made no pretext to saving the body. After he stopped healing, the rate of his conversions dropped. It is significant that healing was the initial attraction and a central feature. It is also a central feature of the greater number, if not all, of the Zionist-type churches in South Africa, and is more elaborate the more a church draws from the traditional patterns.¹⁶

Concepts and rituals within these churches seem contiguous to traditional patterns. It seems as likely that healing would be derived in this way as well.

In the traditional belief system there are well-developed ideas connecting an individual's health to his social life. Through ritual, theory is applied for uncovering the cause of illness. This practice has been referred to as social analysis,¹⁷ whereby the diviner generally points to a breakdown in one's social relationships as a cause of illness. This breakdown can be due to human malevolence, leading to explanations of witch-activity or sorcery. It can also be caused by the wrath of ancestors, if the individual has thwarted kinship principles. Another explanation the diviner may give is that the individual has committed a misdeed. The spiritual agencies generally referred to are personal beings. They function to maintain the unity and strength of the community. It is an idiom that theoretically affects the relationship among humans and between humans and the non-human environment.

The disturbance of a person's social field as a cause of illness is known as "psychosomatic illness" in Western medicine. In this class of sickness, definite body changes occur as the result of mental distress and anxiety at a greater level than the individual's system can sustain.

The only meaningful way to evaluate the amount of stress an individual is contending with, is to view the stress-producing situation as it affects the individual. For this there is a study comparing rural and urban Zulus suffering from hypertension or elevated blood pressure.¹⁸ Scotch was able to account for specific stress-producing conditions as variables for the prevalence of this disease. For example, he notes how the Africans are constantly humiliated by whites talking to them as though they are animals. Basic to this is the systematized control of this large cheap labor force. Over 3,000

arrests were taking place every day at one time for pass laws violations.¹⁹ This causes such fear in the population that the Africans undergo further frustration as they wait in long lines sometimes lasting for two days, in order to keep their passbooks updated.

In order to further control their labor, Africans are seldom allowed to settle in one place (except the barren reserves, or the resettlement camps, which are very similar to concentration camps), and there is little chance for developing their own business. All of this forces the Africans to go anywhere for employment, with influx laws regulating how many laborers can be in one city at a time. They have to take whatever wages they are given, and these wages are hardly adequate.

The results of this are African locations in the cities with an estimated infant mortality rate of over sixty percent, and malnutrition as one of the major diseases affecting the whole population. A large number of people have been shifted to the reserves, to return as migrants housed in a single-sex hostels, but the greater number of Africans formerly in the cities still reside there. In having to migrate for employment, most parents have to be away from home for long periods. Their children are left to fend for themselves. The class of *tsotsi* comes mainly from this background.

Occupations reserved for Africans have high risks and create a high number of widows. The Government gets around social security by sending off these "superfluous appendages" to the reserves if they are unemployed. Scotch found that widows suffered from hypertension proportionately higher than the rest of the population. He also found that a greater proportion of city dwellers over rural dwellers claim to be bewitched, and thought that this must be because there is greater stress in the urban areas. Those who admitted to being bewitched had higher rates of pressure than those who did not admit to it. There is more diffused harrassment in the urban area than in the rural setting. The social features that cause stress are at least in a less emphatic form in the rural areas, where a greater continuity and stability is possible due to the continuation of kin-ties.

The constant degradation and frustration, which is the milieu of the African, creates a hostility in those affected. Scotch reports that this hostility is displaced against wives, causing broken homes; other Africans, causing higher rates of sorcery and bewitchment; and against the self, leading to alcoholism and hypertension.

In the rural areas there is an appeal to the traditional healers, the *inyangas*. Few self-conscious Christians would visit a diviner, however, and this brings us back to the Church. In the first place, African Christians outside the orthodox churches are still seeking a personal agency through which they can apply theory for regulating their world. Their illnesses are caused by social conditions, and some of these illnesses can be influenced by mental processes. Stress has to be recognized to some degree in order for healing to take place. Confessions in Bhengu's Church probably functioned for this purpose, drawing out some of the factors causing the anxiety and insecurity in the individual.

To what extent can we expect more from the churches than salve for the spiritually wounded? To what extent has the African church in South Africa opposed the forces that generate this society (or lack of society)? The Afrikaner Dutch Reformed Church certainly does not oppose the State, and in fact is instrumental to the intentions of the Government. We might expect that this is a tradition within the South African society, affecting all of its members. In fact, the African churches have not opposed the State any more than does the Dutch Reformed Church, and they have no tradition for doing that. Of course, the areas for protest have been severely circumscribed. The leaders of protest have held membership first in political parties, and any church membership would have been incidental. Many people do not regard the churches as leaders, but rather as betrayers. During the riots in 1960, at least in Langa, the Cape Town African township, independent churches were the targets of burnings.²⁰ And the South African Student Organization recently released a statement to the South African Council of Churches in which they said that young people felt the churches were aligning themselves with the *status quo*.²¹

For the handful of ministers who preached "freedom" from the pulpits in 1960, there are many more whose teachings embrace several of the myths generated by the ruling class. One of these myths blames the Africans for their own poverty. Members are encouraged to adjust to what they have. They are taught that private property is a necessary condition to life, failing to explain that acquiring this is only possible for some people in any case, and at the expense, furthermore, of themselves. Examples drawn from other churches would fully illustrate these and other myths. And Bhengu's turning over stolen property to the police has correlations with other church leaders who have collaborated.²² This "collaboration" is an incompletely studied area, however, and I hesitate to suggest this conclusively without further evidence.

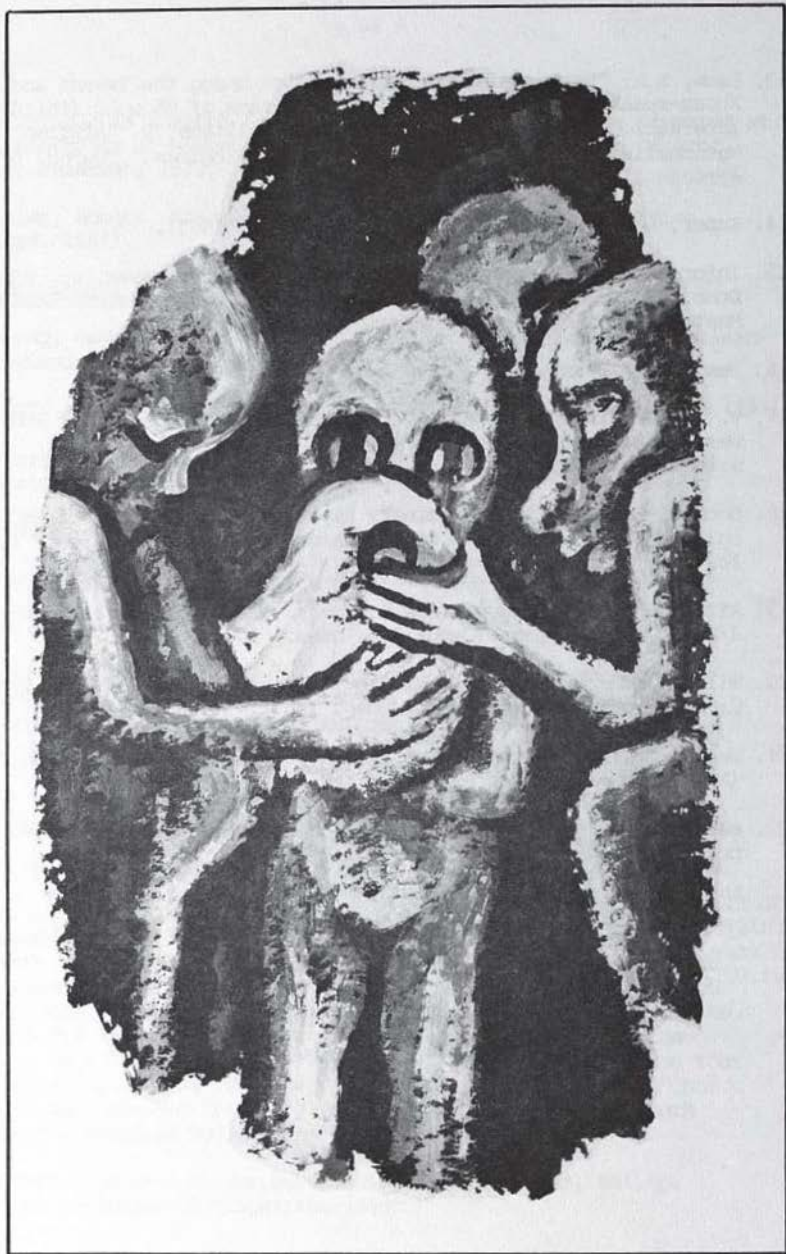
To recapitulate, the greater number of African churches in South Africa use ritual fundamentally in their services. This practice draws on the traditional belief system. That idiom is theoretically opposed to the materialist orientation in the international world. On the other hand, international religions draw their concepts out of the Western world, and are never completely free from their moorings. They hardly seem the solution to the materialist domination. For South Africa, at least one historical condition, peculiar to the Republic, can be identified as a causal factor making the African Independent churches agents of accommodation, and even of collaboration, rather than forces for social change.

NOTES

1. This article is adapted from my Senior Thesis, which was prepared at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, under the direction of Prof. Steven Feierman, 1973.
2. Sundkler, Bengt. *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*. 2nd Edition (Oxford, 1961).
3. Horton, Robin. "African Conversion," *Africa*, 41, 2 (1971).
4. Callaway, Henry. *The Religious Systems of the AmaZulu* (The Mariaanhill Mission Press, 1913).
5. Kopytoff, Igor. "Ancestors as Elders in Africa," *Africa*, 41, 2 (1971).
6. cf. Drake, St. Clair. *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion* (Chicago, 1970).
7. Horton, *op. cit.*
8. in Langer, Susanne. *Philosophy in a New Key* (Harvard, 1942).
9. Langer, *op. cit.*
10. Ossthuizen, Gerhardus. *The Theology of a South African Messiah* (Leiden, 1967) is a collection of the hymnals used; Sundkler, *op. cit.* for basic historical information; Vilakazi, Absalom. "Isonto LamaNazaretha: The Zulu Church of the Nazarites in South Africa," Master's Thesis, Kennedy School of Missions, 1954, who looks at the church after Shembe's son inherited it. Shembe's church is located solely in the reserves.
11. On Limba's church based in Port Eliaabeth, see Mquotsi, L. and N. Mkele, "A Separatist Church: Ibandla like-Krestu," *African Studies*, 5,2 (June) 1946. Limba's church is very much like the Nation of Islam in America. A scattered reference to Limba is in Budaza, Gilbert, "The Native Separatist Church Movement," Masters Thesis, The University of South Africa, 1948. There is some information on the Zion Christian Church in *Drum*, July 1954; *Bantu*, June 1965. This church is located in the Transvaal and is unique for the process by which it became a "recognized" church. One source that discusses ritual to some extent is Becken, H.J., "A Healing Church in Zululand: The New Church Step to Jesus Christ Zion in South Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 4,3 (1972).
12. Information on East London populations is from Mayer, Philip. *Townsmen or Tribesmen* (Capetown, 1961).

13. Pauw, B.A. "Patterns of Christianization among the Tswana and the Xhosa-speaking Peoples," in *African Systems of Thought* (Third International African Seminary, 1960); Williams, D. "African Nationalism in South Africa: Origins and Problems," *Journal of African History*, 11, 3 (1970).
14. Kuper, Leo. *An African Bourgeoisie* (Yale, 1965).
15. Information on Ehengu is from *Bantu*, June 1957; Mayer, *op. cit.*; Dubb, Allie. "The Role of the Church in an Urban African Society," Master's Thesis, Rhodes University, 1961.
16. See notes 10 and 11.
17. V. Turner, in Horton, Robin. "African Traditional Thought and Western Science, Part 1," *Africa*, 37, 1 (1967). cf. Turner *Ndembu Divination*.
18. Scotch, Norman. "A Preliminary Report on the Relation of Socio-cultural Factors to Hypertension Among the Zulu," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 84, 17 (1960).
19. African Research Group. *Race to Power: The Struggle for Southern Africa*. 1st edition, (Cambridge, Mass., 1971).
20. Wilson, Monica and Archie Mafeje. *Langa: A Study of Social Groups in an African Township* (Cape Town, 1963).
21. Legum, Colin. "South Africa at the Crossroads," in *Southern Africa* (New York, 1975).
22. see note 11. For a brief comment on how one church exercised politics, see Kuper, *op. cit.*

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Igbo Folk-tale: *THE OUTING CEREMONY*