

## Scottish Warriors in KwaZulu-Natal

*Cultural Hermeneutics of the Scottish Dance (Isikoshi)  
in the Nazareth Baptist Church, South Africa*

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### Introduction

The Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), one of the largest African Initiated Churches of South Africa, is famous for the dance performances at the church's annual festivals.<sup>1</sup> While the majority of the dance attires could be classified as neo-traditional Zulu style, the young men dance as 'Scots' (*isikoshi*), wearing tartan like-skirts and pith helmets. The invention of this dance by Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the NBC, dates back to the late 1910s and constitutes an intriguing example for the construction of new identities through the appropriation of the colonial Other, making use of the 'tribal warrior' image of the Scottish regiments within the British Empire.

Almost a hundred years later, the dance has become a traditional activity within the church, and the performers have to defend their innovations against the criticisms of the elders, who refer back to the version legitimized by the founder. As one of the most striking religious practices of the NBC, the sacred dance—and especially, the intriguing Scottish dance—has received its share of scholarly attention, with interpretations covering the range from resistance through symbolic inversion to the enculturation of Christianity, or even the transformation of a military tradition into religiously motivated nonviolence. This study juxtaposes these academic interpretations with the views of the actors and explores how the young men, through dancing, negotiate their identity within the church and beyond, and reinterpret, in the twenty-first century, the cultural significance of Scotland in Africa.

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## Historical Background

Isaiah Shembe (c.1870–1935), a lay preacher and healer active at the margins of different mission churches, founded the Nazareth Baptist Church (*iBandla lamaNazaretha*) near Durban in 1910, at the time when the British colony of Natal became part of the Union of South Africa. According to one oral tradition within the church, it was the mission churches' rejection of converts wearing African traditional attire that led Shembe to start his own congregation.<sup>2</sup> Guided through visions sent by God, Shembe established religious practices that included elements from both mission Christianity and traditional Zulu religion but also served to distinguish the new church from both strands of preexisting religious tradition.<sup>3</sup> One of the most prominent distinguishing features was the corpus of hymns which Shembe composed. As outstanding examples of Zulu poetry, the hymns matched the Old Testament feel of Babylonian loss and suffering with the fate of the Zulu people and combined it with the hope of the New Jerusalem, a New Jerusalem Shembe realized in the form of the holy city of eKuphakameni. As well as making use of the Bible, the hymns built upon Zulu clan hymns and reclaimed the disempowered Zulu kingship within the spiritual realm at a time when the British colonial state had dispelled any remnant of autonomous traditional authority by brutally putting down the Bambatha rebellion in Natal. In that time of rapid social change, white settlers regarded Black Christians, and especially those who broke away from the mission churches, as a threat to their supremacy. Consequently, the missionaries, who were losing members of their congregations to the new church, were quick to attack their opponent for defying white control and for seducing native women.<sup>4</sup> But Shembe weathered these allegations and managed to avoid open conflict with state power. Maybe because he

2 Before the founding of the Nazareth Baptist Church, Shembe sent people he healed to other churches for baptism. He decided to start his own congregation only when the American Zulu Mission rejected his converts because they were dressed in traditional attire. For this oral tradition see Becken 1965: 103.

3 The clearest break with the mission churches was the observance of the Sabbath, introduced sometime between 1911 and 1923 (Heuser 2003: 114–119), and the introduction of dancing, which was regarded as an African form of worship (see e.g. Papini 2004: 49–51). On the other hand, Shembe was fiercely opposed to the traditional religion in the form of the 'cattle cult', and he took great care that his rituals differed from traditional ones, as e.g. the puberty rites (Roberts 1936: 62, 123).

4 Natal governor McCallum held in 1906 "that Ethiopianism, which has for its cry 'Africa for the Blacks', is the mainspring of the movement" that stirred rebellion (Guy 2005: 248). For the charges against Shembe see Gunner 1988: 214–218, Papini 1999: 248 f.

fiercely opposed overt political involvement, his church became regarded as a stabilizing influence in the face of newer, more radical forms of Black organization.<sup>5</sup> By the time of Shembe's death in 1935, the Nazareth Baptist Church had a membership of several thousand and owned sizeable plots of land.<sup>6</sup>

Although the church was well established, its coherence depended on the charisma of its leader. Isaiah Shembe's son and successor, Johannes Galilee Shembe (1904–76), initially felt unsure whether he could follow in his father's footsteps, and maybe by way of compensation, it was he who codified the church's beliefs and practices—most notably demonstrated in the publication, in 1940, of the church hymnal, which includes the liturgy for morning, evening, and Sabbath prayers.<sup>7</sup> Still, despite the increasing institutionalization, the structure of the church remained centered on the charismatic leader. This became clear after the death of Johannes Galilee Shembe, when both his brother, Amos Shembe (1906–95), and his son, Londa Shembe (1945–89), claimed leadership of the church. This conflict led to the split of the church, and the majority section led by Amos Shembe left eKuphakameni and founded a new holy city, eBuhleni, nearby.<sup>8</sup> The eBuhleni branch, led since 1995 by Amos Shembe's son, Vimbeni Shembe (b. 1933), has grown continuously. In 2008 one minister of the church estimated the membership to number between one and four million, and close to fifty thousand people attended the July festival of the same year.<sup>9</sup> The smaller eKuphakameni branch underwent difficult times after Londa Shembe was shot in 1989 but has experienced something of a renaissance since 1998, when Vukile Shembe (b. 1980), Londa's son, ended the leaderless period.<sup>10</sup>

### Dancing in the Nazareth Baptist Church

Within the Nazareth Baptist Church, two forms of worship can be distinguished: praying (*ukukhonza*) and dancing (*ukusina* or *umgidi*). The praying

5 See Papini 1997: 17, 1999: 249–251, 2004: 54.

6 According to Roberts (1936: 102) ten thousand people went on the pilgrimage to the holy mountain. She lists the church holdings at the time of Isaiah Shembe's death, and estimates their worth at 25,000 South African Pounds (equal to pounds sterling) (ibid: 71).

7 J.G. Shembe was anxious about his abilities, but proved to be successful in the charismatic qualities of healing and dealing with witches (Roberts 1936: 80, 111).

8 As one of the prominent events in church history, the schism has received its share of scholarly attention. See Becken 1978, Oosthuizen 1981a, 1981b, Masondo 2004, Tishken 2006.

9 Interview with Siphso, 2008-07-06. 50,000 is my estimate.

10 See Heuser 2008: 42 f. The church's spokesperson estimated membership at 300,000 in 2003, Heuser's 'guesstimate' was 10,000 (ibid: 50, note 19).

category includes the daily prayers and the Sabbath services, consisting of communal prayers, a sermon, and the singing of hymns. The religious dance proper takes place only at the church's festivals. Throughout the year the leader of the church visits various temples, and wherever he stays, church members assemble. The main festivals are the pilgrimage to the holy mountain iNhlankakazi in January and the July congregation in the holy city eBuhleni/eKuphakameni, but the church's yearly ritual cycle consists of many more such congregations.<sup>11</sup> At these church gatherings, and only there, the members of the church dance in full attire. There are four groups of dancers and four types of attire: neo-traditional one for the groups of virgins, married women, and older men, respectively, and the Scottish outfit, worn by the younger men.<sup>12</sup> The dances take place at the command of the leader—usually on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays, but not on Saturdays. That the dancing, rather than the more everyday praying, is regarded as the highest form of worship by church members might be due, in part, to its public performance at the great festivals.

Dancing was not part of the religious practices from the beginning. According to Johannes Galilee Shembe, the son and successor of Isaiah Shembe, his father was at first “totally opposed to all forms” of dancing, and introduced it only in 1919 (Fernandez 1973: 42).<sup>13</sup> Before that, church members performed European-style processions only (Mthethwa 1989: 248). It is likely that as Isaiah Shembe drew converts from both mission churches and Zulu traditional religion, some traditionalists began dancing on church premises, and this dancing forced or inspired Shembe to create dances for the Nazareth Baptist Church. Thus, the reluctant decision to include dance as a form of worship may have reflected a shift in church membership as converts from African traditional religions gained in influence over converts from mission churches.<sup>14</sup> From the point of view of the mission Christianity of the time, dancing was certainly a heathen practice, and the sacred dance of the Nazareth Baptist Church can indeed be linked with religious practices of Zulu tradition, and

11 I participated in the congregations at eBuhleni July 2008, Dunnhauser Aug. 2008, Nhlankakazi Jan. 2009, Ntabankulu Mar. 2009.

12 These are the usual dance attires. The group of virgins has four more, but these are worn only once a year as part of the July festival. One of those is also a Scottish outfit, with tartan skirts. For the attires see Brown 1995: 131–136, Papini 2002, 2004, for the virgins' attires Muller 1999: 172 f.

13 Newspaper evidence of dancing in the church dates from 1917. See Heuser 2003: 224.

14 See Brown 1995: 128–131, Heuser 2003: 224–227, Papini 2004: 49–52. The abovementioned oral tradition linking the foundation of the church with the rejection of traditional clothes by mission churches might also reflect these inner-church conflicts.

especially, with wedding dances expressing lineage identity (*isigekle*) (Erlmann 1996:189, Mthethwa 1989: 248). At the same time, the introduction of dancing reflects a change in Isaiah Shembe's attitude toward African traditions, and he increasingly appropriated traditional elements into the religious practices of his church. Another example is the hymns that form the basis of the dancing. These hymns— an outstanding example of Zulu poetry and a testimony to Isaiah Shembe's artistic genius—are based, in part, on the songs of the Zulu descent groups and military regiments (*ihubo*) (Berglund 1976:198 f., Mthethwa 1989: 248). Thus, Bongani Mthethwa interprets the dancing in the NBC as continuing African spirituality and underscores the religious importance of dancing by pointing out, “no man, witchdoctor, diviner, chief or priest can solemnize a wedding. It is the dance, *ukusina* that sacrileges the marriage” (Mthethwa 1989: 246).

But Isaiah Shembe did not simply introduce traditional dances into his church; he created his own form of dancing. While the music and the steps resembled their Zulu predecessors, the songs—the hymns with their artistic intertwining of Old Testament rigour and Zulu history and oral tradition—were something new. And the most obvious distinction from Zulu tradition was the European outfit of the dancers. In the early 1920s married women wore white blouses and black skirts, the younger ones wore the same blouses with blue skirts, and the men wore red kilts and white jackets—the prototype of the Scottish dance uniform. In 1924 only one old man danced in the traditional skin loincloth (*umutsha*), and Shembe introduced the neo-traditional uniforms for men, women, and virgins, which dominate the dancing performances today, only in the early 1930s.<sup>15</sup> This complex introduction of dancing into the church is remembered in the church today, as one leader of a Scottish dance group explained:

When prophet Isaiah Shembe came to the east, you know Zulu people used to dance traditional dance, so he preached to them, taught them God does not like you to drink, doesn't want you to do this, to do that, you should pray all the time. And there was a time when there were no prayers, people were just lazying around, and they started to dance the traditional dance. And that made him so worried, you know, praying to God: What am I to do with these people because they are now singing all

15 For the early dance uniforms see Brown 1995: 114–116, 129–130; pictures taken by the Durban photographer Lynn Acutt in the 1930s show the same range of dance uniforms as today. See album d9 at Killie Campbell Africana Library, Durban (<http://campbell.ukzn.ac.za>).

those songs with explicit content, it is more like his soul was taken away from him, and God told him: no, you must teach them that they must dance like this.... So at that time he did not want to adopt that traditional regalia because he was just only starting, and it was going to be more like, you know, at that time, 1910, you remember our African history, you were more oppressed, so he just started with this, shirts and everything, you see, it only started with the second leader, iNkosi iLanga [Johannes Galilee Shembe] so iNkosi iLanga decided: no, maybe it should stop, Scottish should stop dancing, then he started to introduce the *injobo*, now the traditional regalia, like you should use the leopard skins so that you look beautiful.<sup>16</sup>

INTERVIEW WITH NKOSINATHI, 2009-01-25

It was thus through a process of cultural syncretization, through the reweaving of disparate strands of African and European traditions that Shembe created something new: the sacred dances of the Nazareth Baptist Church.<sup>17</sup> This also is remembered in the oral traditions of the church:

If you can see the difference, we have a traditional attire that side, and this here is more like a European attire. And what Shembe was saying, or what Shembe was doing, was combining the two. Even though we are wearing the European attire, but look at what we are carrying: the shield and this [cow tail whisk]. And what we are doing: we are doing the traditional dance.

INTERVIEW WITH MDUDUZI, 2008-07-27

Part of this process was the appropriation of Scottishness. Its possible sources and meanings will be discussed in the next section.

### Cultural Hermeneutics of the Scottish Dance

The sacred dance is one of the most striking features of the Nazareth Baptist Church—at least, with regard to public visibility. Among the neo-traditional dance uniforms, the Scottish attire stands out, and as such, it has received its fair share of scholarly attention. This outfit consists of a white shirt with green

<sup>16</sup> I have changed the names of all my informants.

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of syncretization and related concepts see Adogame, Echtler & Vierke 2008.

tie, a black skirt, black-and-white-socks, black boots, and a pith helmet. Younger boys wear a red-and-white checked skirt instead of the black one, and a headband instead of the helmet (Brown 1995: 135f). Regarding the source of inspiration for Shembe's creation, most authors opt for the Highland regiments of the British Empire. While many Scots traveled to and lived in Southern Africa, bringing with them their craftsmanship and entrepreneurial skills, their Christianity and political radicalism (and thus having a decisive impact on the colonial and apartheid society), the military regiments were the prime carriers of the invented Highland tradition, and thus contributed most to the construction of Scottish identity on the global scale.<sup>18</sup>

African appropriation of Scottish identity markers has been well established since Ranger (1975) described the competing bands of the East African coast. In South Africa Zulu king Cetshwayo was fascinated by the kilted bagpipe players of the Ninety-first Highlanders (Princess Louise's Argyllshire Regiment) who officiated at the surrender of the Zulu kingdom in 1879 (Papini 2002: 86f), and a union demonstration in the run-up to the beer-hall riots in Durban in 1929 was "headed by a brass band preceded by a native in Highland costume—a kilt" (LaHausse 1990: 112).

Aiming to pin down Isaiah Shembe's inspiration for the creation of the Scottish-style attire worn by his parishioners, a number of scholars have indicated how he might have come into direct contact with Highland regiments. The earliest exposure could have been during the Anglo-Boer war (1899–1901). It is rather unclear what Shembe did during the war, and he stated only that he was displaced from the Boer farm near Harrismith where he had been living as a tenant when the British invaded. Yet there is one oral tradition within the Nazareth Baptist Church that claims that he worked as a cook for a Boer general, and thus was part of the Boer war camp for some time.<sup>19</sup> Based on this evidence Papini (2002: 89f) argues that

given the visibility and combat prominence of the eight kilted regiments and Scottish yeomanry, it seems more than likely that his first exposure to the image of the dauntless Highlander came at this time.

He goes on to maintain that therefore Shembe's appropriation of markers of Scottish identity was singular for the African context because it was based on

18 For the history of Scots in South Africa see MacKenzie and Dalziel 2007; for Scottishness and the military Hyslop 2002.

19 For Shembe's autobiographical statement see Papini 1999: 279, for the oral tradition Papini 1992: 24.

“an experience of the Highlander phenomenon *in the theatre of war*,” something that is of some importance for his interpretation of the attire’s meaning, as discussed below. Shembe may also have come into contact with a Highland regiment during the Bambatha Rebellion (1906), when the second battalion of the Cameroon Highlanders was stationed in Pietermaritzburg (Klopper 1991: 211). Brown (1995: 117), for one, is doubtful about this connection, however, as there is no evidence that Shembe was in Natal, let alone Pietermaritzburg, at the time. Given the fact that many Highland regiments were based in South Africa at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century—including South African regiments like the Transvaal Scottish who wore kilts—Brown argues that “is likely that the exact military unit will never be identified” (*ibid.*, 118); even if it were, it remains unclear what would be the analytical gain from such information regarding the meaning of the Scottish dance uniform in the NBC. Nevertheless, she concludes that “it is probable that there is at least a generic military source for this outfit,” although “the possibility that Shembe was familiar with one of the many Highland dancing societies found in South Africa cannot be discounted” (*ibid.*). This would be the third (this time, non-military) possible source of inspiration for Shembe’s Scottish outfit: the public performances of cultural societies. The Natal Caledonian Society, which had organized Highland games in Durban since 1883, ran a number of annual events in public spaces of the city by the time Shembe arrived in the Durban area in 1907 (Papini 2002: 89, note 15).

These are the various intercultural encounters might have inspired Isaiah Shembe to create the Scottish dancing outfit for his church. Within this context academics have tried to reconstruct the meaning of this cultural innovation, and a number of authors have offered different interpretations so far. But because of the scarcity of evidence, no definitive answers are to be had. Isaiah Shembe never offered any explanation regarding the design of the dance attires, or at least, no such explanation has entered into academic discourse. His son and successor, Johannes Galilee Shembe, explicitly rejected any meaning behind them beyond the charisma of his father or its divine source. When Fernandez interviewed the church leader, he inquired about the symbolic meanings of the costumes and then breached the topic of the dance:

I pursue the topic and ask Shembe about the meaning of the different uniforms worn by the various dancing teams at the July festival. The older men and the unmarried mature women wear traditional garb, but the young men, the young girls and the married women all carry small umbrellas. “Why is that?” I ask. Shembe responds with some impatience that there is no special meaning there. “These were visions my father had.



Everyone always wants to know the meaning. The simple meaning of all is to be found in God and Christ”.

FERNANDEZ 1973: 41

This referral to the charisma of the church founder and to Christianity did not, of course, satisfy scholars looking for the meaning of the Scottish dancers, as it is indeed of limited help in decoding the cultural hermeneutics of the sacred dance. With no explanations to be had from the religious experts, the scholars had to look for contextual evidence. Muller, who focussed on ordinary female members of the church, rather than on its upper male hierarchy, likewise found little to be gained from direct questioning, as she had been “unable to find anyone who can provide an insider’s explanation for these outfits” (Muller 1999: 172). Consequently, she interprets the attires of the virgins by contextualising them, because they “resemble attire worn by others outside of the religious community” and suggests “that they are to be ‘read’ as inscriptions of colonial encounters” (ibid., 172f). It is within this paradigm of interpretative anthropology—with ‘culture as text’ as the key metaphor and focus of the inscription of meaning (Geertz 1980)—that the significance of the Scottish dance attire has been analysed so far. As such, these interpretations of the material culture of the dance show how different cultural currents were interwoven in practice, how cultural meaning was constructed below the level of explicit discourse.

Klopper argues that the Scottish attire drew upon spectacular symbols of state power: not only the Highland regiments of the British Empire, with their kilts, but also (owing to their resemblance) the skin loincloth (*umutsha*) worn by the regiments of the lost Zulu kingdom. The subversion of a symbol of colonial power is thus achieved through this double bind, this cultural syncretization, as Shembe designed a dancing outfit

linked to the suppression of blacks in Natal in an attempt not only to establish some continuity with the past but also to appropriate and thus transform the powers vested in symbols popularly associated with state activities calculated to disrupt the lives of Zulu speakers living in rural Zululand—Natal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

KLOPPER 1991: 211

Muller makes a similar argument with regard to the numerous attires of the group of virgins—both traditional and modern, and including a Scottish outfit—which embodied “the historical encounter in the 1930s between European and African, between colonizer and colonized, between (from the

European perspective) civilized and uncivilized,” and were thus designed to be imbued with “the material power of the European colonizer on the one hand, and the moral power of Nguni tradition on the other” (Muller 1999: 75). Brown links the reference to Western uniforms not with Zulu tradition, but with Christian symbols. She argues that Isaiah Shembe himself wore outfits resembling military dress and that he tried to imitate depictions of Christ in religious texts, especially in the set-up of pictures taken of him. She goes on to say that this “fusion of military dress with the imagery of Christ...suggests that Shembe was using these symbols to project an image of power, of invincibility and compassion” (Brown 1995: 123).

Beyond this empowering aspect of the dance attires, Heuser emphasises the transformation of meaning through the religious re-contextualization. Shembe’s use of the Scottish uniform as part of the sacred dance (understood as a prayer to God), as the highest form of worship within the church, “embodies a critique of African history and a critique of imperial expansion at the same time” (Heuser 2008: 47). Referring to newspaper reports of the 1920s, which represent the dancers as looking just like soldiers, but the dancing also as a war dance transformed into a religious event, Heuser argues that the sacred dance enculturated African worldview into Christian worship, that it constituted an autonomous religious sphere and thus inverted the military symbols and internalised a new ethic of non-violence. Through this inversion the prayers danced in kilts symbolise a re-reconciliation with life, and tell of Shembe’s conversion to Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

Less theological but even more extensive is Papini’s interpretation of the Scottish attire. His starting point, like Klopper’s, is the similarity between the Scottish kilt and the Zulu skin loincloth (*umutsha*), which led to a mutual flash of recognition of the similarity between Zulus and Scots in nineteenth-century South Africa (Papini 2002: 85). According to Papini, Isaiah Shembe gained privileged insight into this affinity between the two ‘warrior tribes’ as a cultural broker in the Boer camp in the Anglo–Boer War (1899–1902), where

Boer accounts admiring Highlander fearlessness under fire gave many Africans within earshot (especially intimate listeners such as cooks to the generals) an impression of these mettlesome, untrousered ‘civilised savages’ that made unmissable the parallel between their blind courage and that of the Zulu ranks only twenty years earlier (in 1879).

Ibid., 91

20 See Heuser 2003: 234 f. The newspapers referred to are *The Star* (1924-07-15) and *Ilanga* (1923-08-03). See *ibid.* 229, 235.

What is more, his position enabled Shembe to learn about subaltern Scottish history, about how the British Empire dispossessed the Scottish Highlander as ‘savages’ of their land, and how it used them as ‘warriors’ in the colonial wars to dispossess further people. In this extended parallel, the fate of the Scottish Highlanders was an omen for the future of the Zulu, and the creation of the Scottish attire Shembe’s warning to his followers. According to Papini’s interpretation, the Scottish attire served

as mnemonic vesture for the kinaesthetic meditation of the colonised upon a danger present but not always clear: one of becoming, worse than imperialism’s victims, its hapless instruments,

and, more generally, as precaution against colonial and apartheid identity politics, as the Scottish dancers reminded

performers and spectators, in each and every liminal moment, that the supreme value of any bounded identity lies in an ecumenical inclusivity, beyond all claims to being primordially fixed in perpetuity.

Ibid., 104

Klopper judges her interpretation to be “necessarily speculative” (Klopper 1991: 211), although she tries to back it with circumstantial evidence, and that is certainly true of all the interpretations presented here. With the scarcity of evidence, different interpretations are possible, and the plausibility each depends largely on the argumentative skill of the scholar. There has been also more pragmatic, less hermeneutic interpretation of the Scottish attire—for example, the argument that the close imitations Scottish costumes served as a decoy to thwart the investigative colonial gaze wary of a Zulu renaissance which dances in traditional attire might have fostered (Papini 2002: 82). Other speculation pointed to the financial benefits that the church members’ new clothing brought to the church leader who had control over the process of production—especially when a person’s salvation depended on the ownership of the whole set of outfits (Brown 1995: 125).<sup>21</sup> But while these strategic

21 Direct evidence for strategic considerations exists for Johannes Galilee Shembe, who explained his new invention, the ‘candle mass’, consisting of night-time dancing: “You see, Dr Sundkler, we have our preaching and teaching. That is alright. But give these people a real mass worship—and they will never forget it” (Sundkler 1976: 181). For the strategic use of dancing to increase the charisma of the leader of the church’s minority branch see Heuser 2008.

considerations might be plausible, they do not exclude cultural hermeneutics, and above all, while they might offer explanations for Western uniforms or a variety of new outfits, they cannot explain why Shembe choose to create a Scottish attire for his sacred dance. In the following I do not try to criticise the interpretations described so far, nor add another one. Rather, I will relate these interpretations of Isaiah Shembe's invention of the 1920s to the present-day practice in the church and try to develop an understanding of what it means to dance with the *isikoshi* in the twenty-first century.

### Scottish Dancers Today

My analysis of the *isikoshi* groups in the sacred dance of the Nazareth Baptist Church is twofold. On the one hand, I describe the meaning of the Scottish attires from the actors' point of view—the point of view of the young men dancing rather than the old men holding leading positions within the church's hierarchy—and relate these views to the reconstructed meaning of the attire's creation almost a hundred years ago. On the other hand, I move beyond the meaning of the attire to the meaning of the dance, to what it means to the young men to be dancing with the *isikoshi* group. This second step also implies a critique of the textual metaphor and considers dancing as a practice in its own right.

When I asked the young men dancing in the Scottish outfit about the significance of this attire, the most common answer was that they did not know. As such, my findings largely mirror Muller's reported lack of insiders' explanations (Muller 1999: 172). But occasionally, dancers would venture some interpretation. Several times, I was told that they were safe-keepers of the Scottish dress until the time when white converts would join the sacred dance and dance in what is really their dress. This answer, or at least its frequency, might in part be due to the fact that a white stranger was asking the questions. But it also reflects the self-confident universal claims of the church, which is also reflected in the story that the church's leader Vimbeni Shembe brought the 2010 Soccer World Cup to South Africa to coincide with the church's hundredth birthday and to facilitate its global outreach. Thus, the Scottish attire was linked with the church's transcending ethnic and racial barriers—at least in theory, if not yet in practice—although the provisional character of the cultural cross-dressing somewhat undermines the deconstruction of these very categories, as argued by Papini (2002: 104).

Another explanation argued that Shembe created the Scottish attire in order to convince those modernized Zulu who rejected their cultural tradition to participate in the dance, which is what God commanded him to do:

When Shembe was sent down here, he was told [by God] that these people have forgotten their roots, they have taken the things of the white people, they are no longer doing what I want them to do which is their culture, now you have to take them back, you have to give them what they want, what they like, and while they are doing that, then you say, ok, ok, come with that, come with that.

INTERVIEW WITH MDUDUZI, 27 July 2008

This kind of explanation seems to echo the internal struggles between converts of mission Christianity and converts of Zulu traditional religion from the early years of the church, when a sacred dance combining traditional dance forms with Western uniforms might have satisfied both factions.<sup>22</sup>

A third kind of explanation linked the Scottish attire with the uniform of soldiers, either unspecified, or identified with the soldiers who fought at Isandlwana, the site of the most famous Zulu victory in the Anglo-Zulu war:<sup>23</sup>

Ok, this is called *isikoshi*, as you know there are Scots, so this is more like their uniform.... Because South Africa was colonized by England and the army that fought in Isandlwana, part of them were *isikoshi*, were Scottish. So in order to take that mentality [*i.e.*, the subaltern] out of the people, so no, no, no, those styles are not just there, we are defeating them, we have taken their war material and we are wearing it and we are doing the traditional dance with it.

INTERVIEW WITH MDUDUZI, 27 July 2008

Of course, this link with the history of Zulu struggles against the British Empire opens up the way for the interpretations focusing on the subaltern appropriation and subversion of colonial power discussed above. But this relation between the soldiers and the dancers is ambiguous, and different dancers attached different meanings to it. One dancer compared the state of mind he reached while dancing with that of the Zulu warriors of old, who did not feel fear when a spirit came over them (*-vuka usinga*) (interview with Vusumuzi, 25 January 2009). Another one emphasised the difference between soldiers and dancers, because as dancers “we fight with the spirit, we don’t fight with

22 For the faction fights see Brown 1995: 128–131, Heuser 2003: 224–227, Papini 2004: 49–52.

23 A Zulu saying links the Highlanders with Isandlwana: “And an old lament runs (inaccurately, strictly speaking, but with unerring spirit), ‘the Highlanders finished us at Isandlwana’ (a British defeat, therefore presumably is meant rather the invaders’ victory at the battle of Ulundi)” Papini 2002: 86.

guns like soldiers" (interview with Manqoba, 25 January 2009). While the first meaning could be interpreted as empowerment through the appropriation of military symbols, as argued by Klopper (1991), Brown (1995), or Muller (1999), the second meaning could be taken to signal the religious recontextualization and inversion of military references, as argued by Heuser (2003). The strict separation of the realm of the church from the evil outside world may also include an ethic of nonviolence that is internalised through the dancing (Heuser 2003: 235); this hypothesis is supported by the story of a third dancer. He considered the sacred dance to be an activity that kept him safe from the corrupting influences of the secular world outside the church:

I used to do karate, used to have the brown belt in karate, but they told me that I should stop doing that, because there is no need, there won't be any incident where you have to fight. I grew up in the township there I used to beat a lot of guys, but they told me that if you follow the teachings of the prophet you don't have to fight any more, so I just gave it up.... I practice [dancing] on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and on Saturday I'm in church, then on Monday and Wednesday I do some social duties, you know, like I have these youngster, some other are orphans, you know I visit them, I help them with their school homework and everything, I just do that.

INTERVIEW WITH NKOSINATHI, 25 January 2009

Within the last type of explanation, there was already a move from the meaning of the dance uniforms to the significance of the dancing itself. When dancing produces certain states of mind, and twice-weekly dancing rehearsals affect the life-style of an adolescent, academic analysis is no longer concerned with hermeneutics of a cultural text, but with the understanding of a bodily practice. With a renewed interest in dance within the science of religion comes a call for a shift in methodology, a critique of the 'culture as text' approach, which offers valuable insights into the production of cultural meaning but is little concerned with what the dancers are actually doing, with their dancing as rhythmic movement of the body. As Lamothe argued in her recent attempt to develop "a theory of religion as practice and performance" (2005: 101): "When all we do is read and write, everything looks like a text, including dance" (*ibid.*, 115).<sup>24</sup> For the remainder of this study, I will be concerned with the Scottish dance as kinaesthetic experience and performance art.

24 For similar arguments see Potter 2008, Samudra 2008.

At one point, instead of asking the young men about the meaning of their dance attire, I asked them why they danced with the Scottish group, and not with the one in neo-traditional attire (*injobo*)—which they could do, because all men form one group within the church, unlike the women, who are divided into virgins and married women. The most frequent answer was very pragmatic: because the Scottish attire was much cheaper, and they could not afford the traditional outfit. But beyond that, they told me, the Scottish dancing is for the young, is much more energetic, more fun and more creative, and they talked about how the movement of the dance brings about a special state of mind, brings them closer to God—that is, they talked about the experience of dancing and of the performance of the dance, and they talked about what dancing meant to them.

Church doctrine teaches that the sacred dance is the highest form of worship within the Nazareth Baptist Church, but for the dancers this extraordinary, divine character of the dance is based on the actual experience of dancing. During specified days dancing lasts for about five hours, and it takes place in all kind of weather, from scorching midsummer sun to cold rain atop the wind-swept holy mountain. While the dancing of the different groups is basically the same, based on the church's hymns, the slow, serene moves of the women contrast with the more energetic dancing of the men, and the dancing of the Scottish group is the most intense, by far. Following the rhythm of the music, with the drums and the horns played by the members of the dance group who are not dancing at the time, and the repetitive dance moves continuing for hours on end, the dancing seems to have certain effects on the dancers. They claim to be driven beyond fatigue and pain, beyond the feeling of the heat, and, in the case of skilled dancers, driven into altered states of consciousness. Two experienced Scottish dancers try to describe their experience:

Like I am saying when you dance you don't control yourself, it is more like we are in a trance. Someone will look at you and see you smiling, maybe you are feeling some other sounds from the outer world, maybe you are seeing some other things, it happens to me, I do not control myself when I am dancing.... I do crazy things, I can even do a somersault, that is how it feels, it is just the spur of the moment, you can just slip into your stomach flat, that is how you feel, they can't control you, they can't touch you, it is not allowed because they don't know how you are feeling at that moment.

INTERVIEW WITH NKOSINATHI, 25 January 2009

In fact it is the biggest prayer we have here, it is the biggest prayer. What Shembe said, he said when you are kneeling and praying, Satan can come

to you and say: Ok, you are praying with this mouth, yesterday you [were] telling a lie with this mouth, yesterday you were insulting somebody with your mouth, and now you are praying and you are doing everything wrong. But when you are doing this dance, you forget about everything that you have done. Your mind is there, you don't think of anything, and he said, then you are in the situation, where you can't think of anything, then it's your time to pray, when you pray God will hear you, because it is more like a meditation, when you have done it up to a particular state, then you feel that "I can't even feel the stone under my feet" then you are doing it, then you can pray, God will hear you.

INTERVIEW WITH MDUDUZI, 27 July 2008

This experience of the sacred while dancing probably provides the deepest level of understanding of what dancing means to members of the Nazareth Baptist Church. The loss of control, the prayer beyond words, the movement of the body dissolving ordinary consciousness reminds of van der Leeuw's notion that "man is danced"<sup>25</sup> or, in Lamothe's words, the dancer's ability "to represent his *individual* body as a medium for the generation of kinetic images of (his *dissolution* in) a rhythmic unity of life" (Lamothe 2005: 120, italics hers). Speaking or writing of in this sense embodied experiences proves to be rather difficult precisely because they ordinarily need not or even cannot be verbalized.<sup>26</sup>

While this experience of dancing provides a central meaning for the sacred dance, it is not specific to the *isikoshi* group. What makes the Scottish group special is the way they perform the dance. According to church orthodoxy, the dancing of all four groups—virgins, married women, traditional men and 'Scottish' men—is basically the same and follows Isaiah Shembe's choreography. What marks out the Scottish is their inventiveness, as they constantly alter their styles and add new moves. These innovations are subject to a fierce competition between the Scottish dance troupes from different temples and

25 "Der Mensch wird getanzt" (Leeuw 1957: 36).

26 On the "difficulty of rendering into analytical discourse those bodily practices consultants do not express verbally" see Samudra 2008: 665; for the kinaesthesia of dance see Potter 2008. Interestingly, when church members talk about dancing, they use the metaphor of 'prayer', while at the same time emphasising that dancing is anything but verbal prayer. Likewise, the modern dancer Isadora Duncan called her dancing 'prayer' or 'revelation', and Lamothe in turn refers to Duncan's dancing as 'soul language' (Lamothe 2005: 119f). It seems hard to avoid metaphors of language when talking or writing about bodily practices.



regions, and they have led, time and again, to conflicts with the leadership of the church. An evangelist (*umvangeli*) of the church who is in charge of the Scottish dancers comments on these innovations:

There is the thing called style, I don't know what the Zulu word is for this, this word is not a Zulu term, I am not sure if it is correct to say variations put in the hymns. It's just like when one is cooking, it doesn't end by putting meat, potatoes, carrots, onions, all these things that have been put together but there is still more that is needed, like knorrox soup, spices, salt, curry powder, yes, now you spice the food. It is the same with the dance there is knorrox soup that people add on top of what Shembe taught them. Shembe gave them as it was but then people added theirs... Its not allowed especially with the Scottish, let me emphasize this, it is not allowed with the Scottish, and it's not permitted to happen because it is not happening according to what Prophet Isaiah taught. There are too many things added as if he made a mistake. It is not allowed just like food, if you put more than necessary spices and salt and many other stuff at the end it is not edible, it is the same thing that is happening to the dance.

INTERVIEW WITH BONGANI, 19 July 2008, conducted in ZULU, transcribed by SICELO MPUNGOSE, translated by MUZIWANDILE HADEBE

So from the point of view of the elders, all the innovations in the dance are illegitimate, and they try to discourage the young men from dancing in this way. But in this they are rather unsuccessful, because the dancers' freedom to create their own styles, to work the spectators, and to compete with others is the reason dancing is so much fun, is central to what it means to dance with the *isikoshi*. As a leader of a Scottish dance troupe explains:

Like I am the leader of the group, so it is more like I designed, we are not, you know, when the drum beats, we are not going to be quick, we are going to be slower, it starts with that, the way we sing it has to be a little bit slower, the way we dance, we have to focus more on energy and power, that is how the styles, how we derive our style. And when we turn, you know, it is verse number two when we are turning, facing sideways now, we have to do it this way. So the leader of the group designs all the styles. And he interprets and instructs the group: This is how we are going to dance. This is what makes us different, we from uMlazi, this is how we dance.

INTERVIEW WITH NKOSINATHI, 25 January 2009

Of course, he knows this means breaking the rules, and if called to order, he will acknowledge the authority of the prophet. But pushing the limits is part of

the game, because to stick to the rules would remove the competition, remove all the fun, make for boring dances like those the women dance:

But it is all one and the same thing, it is not supposed to be different. I will tell you one thing, we are doing one thing you can call it illegal according to prophet. It has to be the same, you have to go to the ladies and dance for the same tune, it is the very same style, you know the maidens you saw them, they all dance the one and the same style, it does not matter that you come from uMlazi or KwaMashu, its uniformity, there is uniformity.

For us, we are the guys, we have some egos, you know, I want to be different from you. I can call it an African tradition, you know the prophet came to Africa, so with lots of ego, I want to be different from you, I want to put more power into what I do, more than you do, so that's how the differences come to be. Yeah, yeah, sideways, they point this side, you know others won't do that. Others will take their shields and put them above their heads. That's how it is different. It is like, you know, like a leopard you see, beautiful with the spots, you see, that is how you distinguish between a leopard and a zebra, it is like that. I want to attract more crowd, you know, we want to attract more crowd, this is how we are going to do it.

INTERVIEW WITH NKOSINATHI, 25 January 2009

It is this creation of distinctive styles that separates the Scottish dancers from the other groups, and that turns their dancing into a performance art. To achieve this the dancers work hard and practice several times a week to hone their dancing skills. While they acknowledge that to dance is their religious duty and a prayer to God, they nevertheless also dance to entertain the spectators and to impress the young women watching. Papini (2004: 55) argues that the sacred dances that Shembe invented reclaimed a tradition of religious dance beyond the competition of Shaka's regimental dances and the "courtship eroticism" of colonial dances for entertainment, and the dancers thus performed "neither clan-praise bombastic nor crowd pleasing antics, but rather a choreography of contemplation and glorification." In this sense the Scottish dancers of the twenty-first century partly subvert the rigid orthodoxy of the church and re-establish links with other strands of Zulu traditional and popular culture. Through their artistic appropriation of the dance, they give new meaning to a "Scottish" style within the Nazareth Baptist Church. A hundred years ago the Scottish dance subverted colonial power, but now it represents the most unruly and creative part of the church's congregation and subverts the church's hierarchy and Zulu conservatism. Yet, because most of the Scottish

dancers are deeply dedicated to their religion, they contribute to the vibrant life of the church by performing its most beautiful dance.

### Conclusion

In the late 1910s, not ten years after founding the Nazareth Baptist Church, Isaiah Shembe introduced dancing as a form of worship into his church. In a process of cultural syncretization, he made use of Zulu traditional dances, combined them with the church hymns he had composed, and designed Western-style dance uniforms. One of these early uniforms was the Scottish, which combined a kilt like-skirt with heavy boots and pith helmet. While neo-traditional outfits replaced the other Western dance uniforms in the 1930s, the Scottish attire has remained one of the four main dancing uniforms until today.

Quite a few scholars have tried to read the meaning inscribed into these Scottish dance attires. As sources of inspiration for Shembe's invention, they identified with either one of the Highland Regiments on duty in South Africa, or with the Highland games performed by the Natal Caledonian Society. The first line of interpretation argues that the appropriation of military symbols subverts colonial power and thus, empowers the dancers of the church. A second reading of the Scottish outfits emphasises the transformation of the meaning of the military uniforms through the religious re-contextualization and proposes that the military symbols are inverted in the religious dance, which both offers a critique of colonial and Zulu militarism and claims an autonomous religious sphere of nonviolence based on the conversion of the church's founder. The third reading starts with mutual recognition between Zulus and Scots, who, based on the similarity of kilt and skin loincloth, acknowledge each other's identity as 'savage warriors'. According to this interpretation the hidden meaning inscribed in the Scottish dance attire is a warning to the Zulu of the danger of being dispossessed and misused by the British Empire, just as the Scots were in the past.

In the second part of the study, I confront these academic interpretations of the meaning inscribed into the Scottish dance attire, as Isaiah Shembe created it, with the meaning that the attire carries for the dancers in the twenty-first century. One of the actors' explanations of the meaning of the Scottish attire is that it is the outfit for future White converts to the church, and that as the current dancers, they are only its guardians. As such, that is an additional twist to the interpretation of the outfit deconstructing essentialist colonial identity politics, because the cultural cross-dressing transcends identities only temporally. On the other hand, this explanation points to the self-confident

claim of the universality of a religion that can move beyond ethnic or racial identities.

A second explanation claims that the Scottish outfit was created to make it easier for modernized Zulus who rejected indigenous traditions to participate in the sacred dance. This explanation points to a conflict between factions influenced by Zulu traditional religion and mission Christianity that characterized the early history of the church. A third explanation links the Scottish uniform with soldiers from the Anglo–Zulu War. This reference remains ambiguous, as some dancers consider the appropriation of military symbols as empowering, while others emphasise the difference between soldiers and dancers, and thus proclaim an inversion of military violence through the autonomous religious sphere.

Beyond the meaning ascribed to the attire, there is the meaning of the dancing itself, and this is of greater significance to the dancers. In considering the actors' point of view, I move beyond the meaning inscribed into the attire to the meaning of the dance itself, considering it not only as cultural text, but also as practice in its own right, as bodily experience or artistic performance. Church doctrine proclaims that the sacred dance is the highest form of worship, but for many of the dancers this is not something learned, but experienced. In dancing the dancer can experience the sacred as a rupture of the everyday existence. It seems that the rhythmic movement of the body can lead to altered states of consciousness. As a bodily experience dancing lies beyond the explicative power of the "culture as text" metaphor, but also, perhaps, beyond the reach of scientific representation (at least in this textual form). This experience of the sacred through dancing is the most important meaning of the dance for the dancers in the Nazareth Baptist Church, but it is not specific to the Scottish dance groups. What makes them special is the way they perform the dance.

This is the second aspect of the practice of dancing. What characterises the Scottish dancers is their artistic creativity as they constantly invent new moves and styles in their dance performances. This continuous innovation is driven by the competition between the different dance troupes, and leads to recurrent conflicts with the church leadership, who consider all innovation as illegitimate derivation from the ways of the prophet. While the Scottish dance attire might have been subversive of colonial power at the beginning of the twentieth century, the Scottish dancing at the beginning of the twenty-first century is subversive of church authority and orthodoxy. But it is precisely this tension, this testing of the limits of creative freedom that makes the *isikoshi* the most exiting and most beautiful form of sacred dance in the Nazareth Baptist Church.

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### Interviews<sup>27</sup>

Bongani, evangelist of the church, 19 July 2008

Manqoba, Scottish dancer, 25 January 2009

Mduduzi, Scottish dance group leader, 27 July 2008

Nkosinathi, Scottish dance group leader, 25 January 2009

Sipho, minister of the church, 06 July 2008

Vusumuzi, Scottish dancer, 25 January 2009

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27 I have changed the names of all my informants. The interview with Bongani was conducted in Zulu, transcribed by Sicelo Mpungose, translated by Muziwandile Hadebe; all others were conducted in English, transcribed by the author.