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Chapter 15
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. 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.2 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.3 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.4 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.