ON THE HOLY MOUNTAIN:
A VISIT TO THE NEW YEAR'S FESTIVAL OF THE
NAZARETHA CHURCH ON MOUNT NHLANGAKAZI,
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The Nazaretha Church is not the largest Zionist Movement in South
Africa, counting a membership of only 10,000, but more research and
writing has been done on this group than on any other Zionist Move-
ment. ¹) This publicity was not caused by the Nazaretha Church itself,
since its activities as a rule are not open to the public, but it may be
due to the outstanding personalities of its leaders, Isaiah Shembe
(Shembe I, died 1935), and his youngest son, John Galilee Shembe
(Shembe II, born 1904), ²) the publication of the hymnary, ³) together
with African orders of service, from which the theology of the move-
ment can be studied, ⁴) and the rich ritual life at their two great annual
festivals. Of these festivals, the July Assembly at the church centre
at Ekuphakameni, on the outskirts of Durban, attracts yearly many
spectators of all races; in contrast to this, the January Festival on the
holy mountain Nhlangakazi is veiled in mystery. ⁵) No European has
previously had the privilege to attend it, ⁶) with the exception of
Mr. H. Weman, who, with Mr. H. Tracey, Director of the African

¹) Dube, J. L., Ushebele, Pietermaritzburg, 1936, (in Zulu); Roberts, E. L.,
Shembe, the Man and his Work, unpublished M. A. Thesis, University of South
Africa, Pretoria, 1936; Sundkler, B. G. M., Bantu Prophets in South Africa,
London, 1948, 1961; Vilakazi, A., Isonto lamaNazaretha: the Zulu Church of the
Nazaretes in South Africa, unpublished M.A. dissertation, Kennedy School of
Missions, Hartford, Conn., U.S.A., 1954; Schlosser, K., Eingeborenenkirchen in
Süd- und Südwest Afrika, Kiel, 1958; Weman, H., African Music and the
Church in Africa, Upsala, 1960; Becken, H.-J., The Nazareth Baptist Church of
Shembe, in Our approach to the Independent Church Movement in South Africa,
Missiological Institute, Mapumulo, Natal, 1966.

²) Becken, 2.

³) Shembe, J. G., Isihlavelo zamaNazaretha, Pietermaritzburg, 1940.

⁴) Oosthuizen, G. C., The Theology of a South African Messiah: an analysis

⁵) Becken, op. cit., 9 f.

⁶) Sundkler, op. cit., 199; Schlosser, op. cit., 278.
Music Research Institute, was permitted to attend a dancing day at the mountain to make musical recordings. 7) Through my long friendship with Shembe II, the Rev. Rector G. Listerud and myself were invited by the leader of the movement to attend the New Year Service at Mount Nhlangakazi, 8) and even to preach to the assembled elect of the Nazareth Church, for whom the mountain festival is a strictly private spiritual affair of prayer, meditation and healing. 9)

The camp of the tabernacles.

Across the first steep descent on Mount Nhlangakazi is a group of tents outside the camp; these tents are used as a temporary shopping centre, in which meat, tinned food and other provisions are stored in large quantities. The participants in the New Year Festival have to feed themselves, but on a Saturday, the Sabbath of this church, there is no smoke nor fire in the whole camp. On this day, they are not allowed to prepare any cooked food, but have to eat what was prepared on the preceding day. In the vicinity of the "shopping centre", fountains provide water for drinking and washing. The great stock of soap and washing powder kept in the store for sale is another indication of the cleanliness towards which Shembe educated his people.

Further up is the gate of the camp. There is one permanent building only, a rectangular blue-stone house with a corrugated iron roof, which Shembe II provided for his children. His son, one of three children who are studying at the Ongoye University College for the B.A. Degree, informed us that his father is staying in the large white tent below the krantz of the mountain, and that his mother lives in a grass-hut nearby.

Higher up lies the camp of the women and girls, who form the majority of the participants of the festival. The "tabernacles" are constructed of a set of light poles, covered by branches and grass, and reinforced by plastic bags and fertilizer packets against the recent heavy rain. We estimated that there were some 200 huts of different sizes on this slope, with an occasional simple camping tent among them. On open ground in the midst of the camp, we passed a group of about 200 white-clad girls receiving instruction from one of the "nuns".

7) Weman, op. cit., 105.
8) This high table mountain is in a remote part of Ndwedwe District, accessible only with the permission of the Bantu Affairs Commissioner.
9) Weman, ibid.