Introduction

Over the sixty-four years since the death of the Zulu Zionist prophet Isaiah Shembe (c. 1870-1935), his early life story has become known to both his church and academia largely through John Dube’s 1936 portrait UShembe. Because the work contains (pace Dube) certain disparaging allegations concerning the prophet’s modus operandi,1 his son and successor Johannes Galilee sought to reduce reliance on this ‘biography’ by launching in the 1950s, within the Church, an oral history project the partial results of which were seen by Sundkler, and proclaimed by him ‘one of the most amazing in the history of African religious movements’.2 Notwithstanding Galilee’s intentions, in the collected Church elders’ testimonies, recently published as ‘The Story of Isaiah Shembe’ (see Hexham & Oosthuizen), most of the episodes related as the early life of the prophet derive directly from UShembe, and apparently through a latter-day ‘condensation’ (Becken’s term for what is a

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1 On 28 April 1939, three years after UShembe’s publication, Faye sent a rough translation, ‘as directed’, to the Chief Native Commissioner, with a preface of his own which designated the work ‘a compilation’, and asserted under the heading ‘Material for the book’, that ‘Dube’s biography of Shembe, as published, incorporates certain material which was written up for him and is not in his own handwriting’ (State Archives, Pretoria—File NTS 1431, 24/214 (henceforth SAP); Faye to CNC (54/2), 28 April 1939). The italics here denote a longhand insert, presumably Faye’s, into this ‘intelligence’ typescript destined for the Secretary of Native Affairs, which suggests he was unclear about exactly which of the total of 21 separate texts making up the manuscript UShembe that he proofed were actually Dube’s work. Analysis shows at least two different hands, possibly three, and the offending chapters assuredly not the work of Dube himself.

conflation of Dube with elements of the oral biography) that has since 1975 been disseminated among the core church as typewritten/laser-printed, photocopied stapled booklets in various editions with the common title 'Incwadi yokuzalwa kuka Shembe' ('The Book of the Birth of Shembe').

Only halfway through its biographical section does UShembe's narrative shift (unaccountably) from reported speech into first-person. Indisputably, therefore, as authoritative source Dube's work should yield place to the present testimony—an interview transcript of the prophet's oral account of his early life, taken down six years before Shembe died, and forgotten ever since amongst the archived papers of Carl A.N. Faye (1888-1965), chief clerk and interpreter/translator of the Natal Native Affairs Department (NAD) throughout the period of Shembe's mission.

Ruth Finnegan has recently noted a 'turning away from oral traditions and texts as things, to interest in the people who produce, record and use them'. Perhaps therefore the task of learning a more complete biography of Isaiah Shembe which this text sets us should rightly begin by disclosing the indistinct figure of Faye; he offers us a record that not only enhances as a whole what was told to Dube, but strongly augments it in certain key areas, and also brings fresh data to a lately emergent understanding of the political dynamics of the period (see Cope 1993) which must be welcomed as indispensable to an appreciation of the work done by Shembe.

Faye's papers are housed at the Natal Archives in Pietermaritzburg, and in their volume (fifteen boxes) and variety (from proofs of novels

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3 Giving 1975 as the date of its first appearance, Hans-Jürgen Becken attributes (Hexham et al.: xv) the compilation to Church secretary/archivist Petros Dlomo, who transcribed all the testimonies comprising 'The Story of Isaiah Shembe', as well as collecting, inter alia, the original writings of the prophet in successive editions of a 13 x 17 cm 120 pp. booklet printed in Durban and entitled 'Nazareth Baptist Church Umngcwabo' (lit. 'Burial Service'). I saw a copy of what is probably the original 'Incwadi yokuzalwa' only after Dlomo's death in 1993, but found that the elderly evangelist Solomon Mdluli claimed authorship (1995 Nhlangakazi festival, Sunday 15 January), and indeed was able to recite its contents very accurately for videotape. Two subsequent versions have incorporated this work in broader editions entitled 'UShembe nobuNazaretha' (one by Mthembeni Mpanza, the other by Dlomo's successor the preacher Madondo) which contain additional material: the prophet's praises; verses from Shembe's hymns as captions for photographs; testimonies relating to the period of Amos Khula Shembe; and selected items from the Umngcwabo booklet.


5 Sienaert: 92.