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NARRATIVE CHURCH HISTORY AS PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL MESSAGE
Some Findings from the Pilot Research Project on the Oral History of the Nazareth Baptist Church (amaNazaretha) of Shembe*

In the course of 1989, I was busy for almost half a year in my field research work on the Oral History of the Nazareth Baptist Church. This project is pioneering because it is done in full cooperation with the said church. Together with co-workers of the amaNazaretha we went on a pilgrimage following by car or by jeep the tracks that the prophet Isaiah Shembe once trod and in the course of our journeys covering more than 7500 kilometers from the Transkei in the South to Mozambique in the North, we discussed with the church members their local traditions and we enjoyed fellowship with them; we worshipped together and we attended the great functions and festivals of this movement. When listening to the sermons, a white friend of mine, who sometimes came along, remarked to me: "This is a strange way of preaching; they always tell old stories of their encounters with Shembe!" However, by this remark he actually hit the mark; for telling the story is to them a meaningful way of communicating the Christian message.

This is not a vague thesis; rather I share it with recent findings of scholars in missiology. Let me quote John Pobee:

"One of the most exciting things about Africa today is the African Instituted Churches (A.I.C.) or more commonly African Independent Churches or African Christian Independency. The membership is often recruited from the marginalized, the voiceless, the poor, the non-literate. They nevertheless have a very lively faith and a strong sense of mission. Their story is often told in the form of a story, mostly unwritten. But it is often the story of manifestations of the power of God in healing, exorcism and glossolalia, precisely gifts which Christ bequeathed to His church, but which are somehow put in abeyance by established Christianity. It may not be erudite history and theology; but it is the story of a church living in time and space, living the biblical

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faith and addressing the hopes and fears of people, helping people to experience the transcendent, which they yearn for but have been starved of in the so-called historical churches - a history not written up but still history, Christian oral tradition.\(^1\)

This way of preaching by telling the story is different from sophisticated sermons in Western churches. However, it fits into the thought structures of a scriptless society. In fact, Africa is no longer of a pure scriptless culture; children are taught all over reading and writing, people read their newspapers and write letters. The influence of the church on literacy ought not to be underestimated: The amaNazaretha also read their bibles diligently and sing from their hymnbooks. Africa is in a stage of transition from scriptless to literate culture. However, oral communication is still more in their line, as we experience it also with representatives from other developing countries in ecumenical conferences. Of course, this also applies to the presentation of church history. From a recent meeting of the Commission for Church History in the Third World, I quote Ogbu U. Kalu saying:

"A sage quipped that a method is not an indifferent net in which reality is caught, but the method is an element of the reality itself. If our church history is a form of Christian witness, then our method may borrow from the teaching techniques in the parables of the Kingdom. Jesus told stories which enabled people to search themselves. The language and imagery were simple, alluring and easily understood. The stories elicited participation. The subject matters related to life and secular events. Jesus was indeed a masterly story-teller - the characteristic which Trevelyan advocated in his famous essay 'Clio as a Muse.' In our technological age, scientific jargons tend to ruin the old, spirited narrative and flair of historiography."\(^2\)

In this vein, African Independent Churches have told their story over and over again in the pursuits of their missionary endeavors. In the course of the above-noted transition to literacy, some AICs recently tried their hand on the work to condense oral testimonies to writing.\(^3\) The largest documentation of this kind has been collected by the industrious work of the archivist of the Nazareth Baptist Church, Petros M. Dhlomo. Not only by daylight, but also at night by the light of a paraffin lamp, he sat at his typewriter, and the testimonies by members of this church fill by now more than 550 narrowly typed folio pages in the Zulu language which are the basis of our present study.