
*African Pilgrimage: Ritual Travel in South Africa's Christianity of Zion* is a study of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), one of the largest of Southern Africa’s so-called ‘Independent’ churches. This is an extensive network of African-led churches that from the early twentieth century sought to define themselves independently of European and American missionaries (while nonetheless still working closely with them, in many instances). The ZCC headquarters – Zion City, Moria – is located in today’s Limpopo province, South Africa, and its millions-strong membership spans the whole of Southern Africa. Its early twentieth century founder, Engenas Lekganyane, was part of a large group of African preachers and evangelists linked to the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion, an early Pentecostal-type denomination from the United States that was active in South Africa from 1904. Today, the church is led by Engenas’s grandson, Barnabas Lekganyane, a figure to whom followers attribute miraculous healing and rain-making powers, as they did to his grandfather. This influential church has been the subject of much scholarly attention. In 1985, Jean Comaroff wrote her famous *Body of Power, Spirit of Resistance* in 1986 on the ZCC.1 Since then, Allan Anderson’s work on the church stands out, and a number of South Africa-based scholars – principally from a theology/religious studies perspective – have also written extensively on the ZCC.2

Muller’s study is shaped by Comaroff’s pioneering approach to Independent Christianity, mainly discernible in his emphasis upon Zionist material culture such as dress, dance, medicine and alcohol; he pays ‘serious attention to symbolic action’ (p. 4). Muller depicts Zionist rituals as a means for members to symbolically restore a fragmented world by building upon the rich heritage of pre-colonial religion, as well as selectively incorporating aspects of Christianity (p. 196). However, while Comaroff focuses on the church during the apartheid decades, Muller examines the ZCC in post-apartheid South Africa. And in particular, Muller focuses on an important phenomenon frequently passed over in the literature: the propensity of the ZCC to undertake regular pilgrimages, both to Moria and to sites across the region such as sports stadiums that are temporarily transformed into ‘Mini Morias’ (p. 150). Muller suggests that pilgrimage allows Zionists to access forms of belonging.

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parallel to those prescribed by the nation-state. Crafted through constant travelling, ZCC identity is transregional rather than national; Moria as the pilgrimage destination par excellence is the new capital of the ZCC spiritual polity. Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane – the emotional focus of the pilgrimage – is a combined chief/rain-maker figure who rivals the prestige of secular politicians. Muller claims that ‘pilgrimage [is] the most ambitious ritual in the ZCC’s healing system’ through which ‘[they] address the health of their world’ (p. 195). For Muller, it is ZCC pilgrimage that makes the new ZCC world.

The first part of the book (‘ZCC Worship Observed’, ‘The ZCC Pulpit’, ‘The Prophet’s Word’) offers an outline of ZCC worship. Muller contrasts preaching with prophecy, noting the continuous overlap and interaction between the two types of ministry. The second part (‘A New Year’s Festival at the ZCC Headquarters’ and ‘Zion City Revisited’) discusses ZCC pilgrimage to Moria, basing its analysis upon two pilgrimages Muller undertook with church members in September and October of 2005. Muller concludes that pilgrimage both strengthens the ZCC community, and meets the aspirations of individual pilgrims seeking blessing from Bishop Lekganyane in their financial endeavours and other entrepreneurial activities (p. 139). The final part of the book turns to the ‘long-distance outward-bound pilgrimages’ of the church (p. 159), the regular occasions when Bishop Lekganyane travels around Southern Africa meeting with his faithful. Chapter Eight (‘A Border-Crossing Pilgrimage’) offers an inversion of Comaroff’s ‘Body of Power’: here the focus is on the South Africans who stream across the border into Botswana to meet with their Bishop, rather than the Zionist Tshidi labour migrants who left Botswana for employment in South Africa. Muller sees this large-scale movement of Zionists across the region as a remaking of South Africa into a stage for their spiritual aspirations, as a ‘reclamation and anointment of the physical landscape, into the symbolic landscape of a reintegrated cultural-religious complex as represented by the ZCC world’ (p. 177).

In common with many Africanist theological studies, Muller’s analysis of ZCC pilgrimage hinges upon a highly reified notion of traditional cultural and religious purity. Despite Muller’s avowal at the book’s start that the ZCC does not ‘draw on a single, monolithic, traditional culture’ (p. 16), this is exactly what he argues throughout the book with frequent references made to how pilgrimage invokes idioms of African Traditional Religion (ATR) and African cosmology (see the lengthy entries for ATR in the book’s index). Muller does not acknowledge that scholars of African Christianity have long found ATR a problematic term for promoting a vision of African religion as primeval and unchanging.3 If Muller believes that ATR still has analytical value, his study would have been strengthened by a discussion of the debates surrounding this contentious term. As it is, he burdens ATR with considerable weight, using it to describe the ZCC as a contemporary manifestation of an older religious tradition (p. 198) and thereby locking ZCC members into a rather static discourse of indigeneity. Bishop Lekganyane, for example, is little more than a reprise of a rain-making chief (p. 191), and the ZCC body of the faithful is merely a new form of ‘tribe’ (p. 173). I would have welcomed more attention to Zionists as cultural and religious innovators rather than merely preservers of an improbably homogenous traditional past.