Joel Cabrita


The Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC, *or Ibandla lamaNazaretha*), founded in 1910 in today's KwaZulu-Natal, is one of the most researched African Independent Churches (AIC). Over decades academic literary production has shown interest in the church's peculiar shape of theology and expressive religious culture, whose basic features were introduced by its founding figure, Isaiah Shembe (c. 1869–1935). The church offers a unique ritual calendar of pilgrimages and church festivals. In comparison with many other AIC, the NBC claims an institutional longevity which was in almost every phase of church history erupted by internal feuds over power. Such thematic complexes – and many more to name – have exerted a multi-disciplinary attraction.

Joel Cabrita's study presents the most recent narrative of the long history of *Ibandla lamaNazaretha*. The book's front page is an historic color photograph from 1940 depicting an open air scene from the annual January pilgrimage to Mount Nhlangakazi. Church members are sitting on ground in semi-circled rows, all clad in their white surplices. The photograph also illustrates a gendered organization of ritual space, dividing membership into male and diverse female sections, recognizable by different headgear. The whole scenery is arranged in an amphitheater-like environment. The photograph's central stage is partly covered by the branches of a tree; we can assume several people sitting lined-up on the ground. Next to this area is placed a small table decorated with a white cloth. Cabrita does not engage in the hermeneutics of historic photography. Yet, the “empty table” preserves a code to Cabrita’s research on the NBC: The picture represents a moment in a service-like setting in Christian tradition. The empty table perhaps serves to place sacred texts on it. This is the scope of the book, namely to outline “a history of sacred texts” in *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* (p. 1). She emphasizes an evangelical understanding of Holy Scriptures, which counts on an immediate, direct revelation of divine will through the written word of God. Cabrita exemplifies the modes of production, reception and selection of sacred texts throughout the history of this AIC. The canonization of scriptures, she argues, unfolded a totalizing impact on the ecclesiastic identity of *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* and oriented the interpretation of life by its members. The church “embodied” the “evangelical impulse to reform every aspect of life by submitting to the script of the holy book” (p. 2).

By highlighting the “evangelical impulse” Cabrita queries several well-established categorizations of *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* history. One prototype posi-
tion relegates the church’s liturgical and ritual inventory to supposedly authent-
tic textures of local African religion; another classifies the format of *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* as a revitalization of Zulu society and a generic element in the rise of 20th century Zulu nationalism. By contrast, Cabrita inscribes *Ibandla lamaNazaretha* into global Christian history. Instead of profiling the African-
ness or locality, she depicts the church as an authoritative player in transna-
tional Christian networks; instead of diving into the church’s symbolic and performative repertoire, she acknowledges the church’s representation of the “evangelical impulse”.

Cabrita unfolds the hermeneutical quality of this impulse by applying terms accredited to the study of global Pentecostalism. “Testimonial preaching” – a hybrid of orality and textuality – is one of Cabrita’s keys to connect Nazaretha history with early Pentecostal milieus in Southern Africa, a link brought out by pioneer researcher on AIC, Bengt Sundkler some decades ago. In strong chap-
ters Cabrita relates the authority of such texts to power. “Testimonial preach-
ing” is an evangelical style of pre-, and post-conversion narrative that applies biblical grammar and imagery to legitimize transformation of the self. But they also release an interceptive aura in the legitimization of hierarchical power; in succession conflicts texts of this kind reveal the charismatic status of claimants for leadership. Their legitimizing quality spins over to secular power, exampli-
ified by the ascension to chiefly authority. The NBC is known as a church of chiefs and for preserving classic forms of praise poetry in relation to traditional authorities. Nazaretha techniques of inventing sacred texts support the conti-
uity of praise oratory. But they supplement it by a narrative source taken from evangelical holiness preaching. In other words, the Nazaretha corpus of sacred texts creates a space of freedom. It allows for radical “breaking with the past” and at the same time inspires innovations in daily routines.

This freedom of action may cause autonomous dogmatic positions. Cabrita states that “the key actor” in the Nazaretha corpus of sacred texts is “no longer Jesus Christ, but the eternal spirit of Shembe” (p. 3). This contradicts with clas-
sical evangelical hermeneutics. Pentecostal emphasis lies in the intervention of the Holy Spirit in daily life; evangelical piety is grounded on an emotional relationship with Jesus Christ; evangelical impulse defines the Bible as exclusive holy book and sacred text *par excellence*. The Nazaretha impulse, obvi-
ously, exceeds the core *sola scriptura* formula in Protestant Christianity. The “empty table” comprises far more than the Bible and includes standardized hymnbooks, classic praise songs, documented sermons transmitted by individu-
al followers, and various local oral traditions transformed into texts. Cabrita’s intuitive notion of an “evangelical impulse” remains vague in resolving such contradictions.