

# *Faith in Action: Mokhukhu of the Zion Christian Church*

*Marcus Ramogale & Sello Galane*

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The Zion Christian Church (ZCC), founded in 1924 by Engenas Lekganyane, is the largest of the African indigenous churches in South Africa. These churches “combine Christianity with some elements of traditional African belief” (Joyce 1989:295). Thus they are, in several significant ways, different from the mainstream Christian churches, brought to the southern African subcontinent by European missionaries, that adhere to conventional Christian beliefs and practices.

The ZCC belongs to the so-called independent churches of South Africa — described as independent because they are not under “white control” (Lukhaimane 1980:1). The Zionist churches did not break away directly from the mission establishment; their origins lie, instead, in Zion City, Illinois, where John Alexander Dowie (1847-1907) founded the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in 1896. The influence of his church spread to South Africa in 1904 when Daniel Bryant baptized several Africans (see Lukhaimane 1980:14).

Independent Ethiopian churches, on the other hand, have their roots in the history of resistance to the imperial system. In the thinking of many White missionaries, the success of Christianization depended on Westernization, and they intertwined religious conversion with the imposition of new cultural norms. This, inevitably, led to the phenomenon of “cultural deprivation” among African converts. As a consequence, in the second half of the 19th century some converts attempted to protect and perpetuate certain aspects of African culture. For example, the rise of “nativistic” sentiment prompted the Reverend Nehemiah Tile to break away from the Methodist Church in 1884. The Ethiopian movement in South Africa is often traced to this event, because thereafter the breakaway church movement gained momentum.

The separatist movement was not just a rejection of alien cultural values; it was also aimed at revitalizing the African society which colonial conquest had rendered ineffectual. According to some scholars, the separatist movement can be seen as the struggle of the African to assert his significance as a human being. This significance he knew very well in his home before his culture was disrupted by the impact of Western culture. He had had to surrender it in the face of overwhelming and awe-inspiring wonders of the White man. He was then left without purpose, and his degeneration as a human being began. The Separatist Churches restore this sense of purpose (Vilakazi, Mthethwa, and Mpanza 1986:17-18).

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To this end, “indigenous” customs were, and continue to be, foregrounded within a Christian framework in the independent churches.

According to Lukhaimane, the ZCC arose out of “personal differences” that existed between Engenas Lekganyane and the elders of the Zion Apostolic Church and the Zion Apostolic Faith Mission — churches of which Lekganyane was once a member (1980:2). Thus the formation of the ZCC was a “Black from Black” secession (Lukhaimane 1980:2). What places the ZCC firmly within the separatist or independent movement and closely links it to the Ethiopian churches is not provenance but a common emphasis on the retention of certain African customs and norms.

As a Zionist organization, the ZCC is characterized by an emphasis on divine and faith healing, purification rites, dancing, night communion, river baptism, the holy spirit, taboos, prophesying, and so on.<sup>1</sup> There are several formations within the ZCC which have been created to provide prayer and communion forums for members. The main ones are Mokhukhu, the Female Choir, the Male Choir, the Brass Band, and Nkedi. Mokhukhu is generally regarded by members as the most important of all the groups.<sup>2</sup>

### THE ORIGINS OF MOKHUKHU

In Sepedi the word *mokhukhu* means a “shack” or “shanty.” In Zion City Moria — the headquarters of the ZCC — situated some 40 km east of Pietersburg in the Northern Province, there are many such shacks.<sup>3</sup> The manner in which the word *mokhukhu* came to be applied to a dominant formation within the ZCC lies in the early history of conflicts within the church. After Engenas Lekganyane’s death in 1948, Joseph, his son and appointed heir, succeeded him as the leader of the church. However, Joseph’s older brother, Edward, contested this with the help of some church members. Traditional custom was in his favor as the older brother, for among the Bapedi the eldest son succeeds his father. It is said that, as a way of intimidating Joseph’s followers, the pro-Edward faction

burned the shacks in which Joseph’s supporters lived. When each shack was ablaze, the Edward faction danced and sang a song containing the words “*u yasha umkhukhu*” (a shack is burning). This song, which was isiZulu, was begun by pro-Edward migrant workers based in what was then known as the Reef. The dancing pattern they formed eventually became popular within the branch that the Edward camp established after the conflict and came to be known as Mokhukhu. The name now refers to both the *dance pattern* and to the *group* that performs the dance.

Edward’s faction called its branch the Zion Christian Church. By retaining the original name of the church that Engenas had founded, they were possibly suggesting that Edward was the legitimate successor to his father. Joseph’s camp coined the name St. Engenas Zion Christian Church for their group: By putting “St. Engenas” before “Zion Christian Church,” they were also insisting on their lawful link to the founder of the ZCC. Mokhukhu is found only in Edward’s ZCC, perhaps because it conjures up unhappy memories for the leadership in Joseph’s group. Because it played a decisive role in the establishment of Edward’s ZCC, Mokhukhu is accorded a central place in the church. Some members of the church refer to it as *motheo wa Kereke* (the foundation of the church).

### STAMPING EVIL UNDERFOOT

According to members of Edward’s ZCC, Mokhukhu plays a role very similar to that of *kgoro ya banna* found among the Bapedi tribes. *Kgoro* refers to a meeting place for men and also to the meeting held there by tribesmen to discuss matters that affect the tribe. Within the church, this *kgoro* focuses mostly on communion, dancing, singing, and praying.

Mokhukhu is now a strictly male organization, but when it began women were part of it. They were eventually separated into their own structure, because the ZCC keeps to traditional values, and the rigors of Mokhukhu dancing subjected the women to what the church regarded as undignified behavior for them. For example, when they dance Mokhukhu, members frequently leap into the air and then come down stamping their feet on the ground with their huge white boots, called *manyanyatha*, in order symbolically to subjugate evil. The heavy stamps have a musical function as well in that they give each dance a particular rhythmic pattern. The leaps are also symbolic of each member’s desire to fly on the wings of faith — wings

<sup>1</sup> Zionist churches of South Africa have nothing to do with Judaism or the movement for the development of the Jewish state. This brand of Zionism takes its name from Zion City, Illinois — the birthplace of the movement.

<sup>2</sup> All non-English words in the text derive from Sepedi, one of the Bantu languages spoken in South Africa. The Sepedi-speaking Bapedi are the largest ethnic group in the Northern Province.

<sup>3</sup> Zion City Moria is also the meeting place for the Church’s Easter gathering. More than a million pilgrims meet there every year during the Easter weekend. South African political leaders such as P.W. Botha, F.W. de Klerk, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, and Nelson Mandela have attended the Easter meeting as guests of honor.





*At a gathering of the Zion Christian Church in South Africa's northern province of Moria, the men of Mokhukhu dance as an expression of faith. More than one million pilgrims meet in Zion City Moria every year for the church's Easter gathering.*

Photo © T. J. Lemon

which help the faithful to remain buoyant even in adversity. Thus the leaps are a self-energizing act for the believer; they are a way of replenishing spiritual resources and of expressing spiritual vitality physically. Mokhukhu gives male members of the Church a strong sense of identity and a forum for social interaction. Their khaki uniforms and white boots provide a visible sign of oneness for members and emphasize their role as *mash ole a thapelo* (an army of prayer).

Mokhukhu members are expected to protect the interests of the church when these are at stake, just as they did when Edward was involved in a struggle to succeed his father. Perhaps their army-like uniforms are also meant to suggest their role as defenders of the faith.

The dominant role of Mokhukhu as a men's organization not only derives from the church's history and values, but is also believed to have a Biblical justification; 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 is often quoted to support this:

[Man] reflects the image and glory of God. But woman reflects the glory of man; for man was not created from woman, but woman from man. Nor was man created for woman's sake, but woman was created for man's sake.

It is obvious that the feminist movement has not had an impact on the way the church establishment thinks.

An important factor contributing to the cohesiveness of

Mokhukhu and unity within the ZCC is its insistence on discipline. Every new, able-bodied member of the church is expected to join Mokhukhu for purposes of initiation into church rituals and customs. (In the words of one member, the organization helps to "tame young men by subjecting them to its discipline.") The disciplined behavior of Mokhukhu members is legendary, and one can easily see it when they perform. Another factor is the church's belief that in worship one has to be passionately involved; the soul, mind, and heart — in fact the entire body — must be focused on God. This allows for intense religious expression, which gives the church a unity of purpose.

### HUNGER FOR GOD

The impetus behind the energetic performances of Mokhukhu derives from a hunger for God and the holy spirit. Without a desire for union with God, one's performance becomes insipid. As an old member put it, "When we perform, hunger for food is replaced by hunger for the Holy Spirit. Once we are filled up with the Holy Spirit, we can perform all night."

According to the code of behavior that Mokhukhu members abide by, sexual intercourse must be avoided prior to a performance, for it is believed that this takes away the energy that must be devoted to the worship of God, and, in



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addition, defiles the body, thus undermining the purity of one's performance. Sexual abstinence is known as *go ikilela*.

To be a member of Mokhukhu requires total dedication. Performances last for hours, with no meals in between, and yet energy levels never drop. If asked what keeps them going, Mokhukhu members' reply is "faith" and the "Holy Spirit." For example, Mokhukhu performs every Wednesday from 6 to 9 p.m., and a weekend performance starts on Saturday at 11 p.m. and lasts until 7 a.m. the next morning. Between 7 and 11 a.m. on the Sunday, members can wash and have breakfast. At 11 a.m. the performance recommences and will last until 2 p.m., when the Sunday church service begins. An outsider may find this expenditure of time and energy excessive and wasteful, but for members it is an expression of faith. Religion is central to the lives of Mokhukhu members and other formations within the Church. As a member of Mokhukhu said, "We drink tea or *mogabolo* (blessed water) before a performance; then we perform without becoming exhausted. Faith prevents us from getting fatigued."

It is also believed that the more vigorous the dance, the less tiring it becomes; a robust performance encourages intense perspiration, which releases debilitating "impurities" from the body.

Mokhukhu members perform not only in church gatherings but also at wedding ceremonies and other social functions, if invited. Thus non-church members are afforded the chance to see faith in action and to see how the faithful behave "*ge ba hlomoga pelo gore ba be le Modimo*"

(when their hearts grieve for oneness with God). The grief, however, is a joyful one; it is inspired by intimations of a divine presence. What energizes Mokhukhu has been succinctly expressed in the lyrics of a song sung by the ZCC Male Choir:

*Ke lella moya,*  
I yearn to save the soul,  
*Ga ke llele marapo.*  
I don't yearn to save the bones.  
*Ga ke llele nama,*  
I don't yearn to save the flesh,  
*Ke llela moya wa me.*  
I yearn to save my soul.  
*Ga ke llele taemane,*  
I don't desire diamonds,  
*Ga ke llele gauta,*  
I don't desire gold,  
*Ke llela moya.*  
I yearn to save the soul.  
*Ga ke llele tsa lefatshe,*  
I don't desire worldly things,  
*Ke llela moya wa me.*  
I yearn to save my soul.

The desire to save the soul, and thereby to enter God's spiritual realm, explains Mokhukhu's dynamism.

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