# Gendered Leadership in South African Churches: Case Studies of African Instituted Churches and the Dutch Reformed Church

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## Introduction

According to the general perception churches in South Africa during the Apartheid era until today are perceived as male-dominated. Though women are frequently formally admitted to the ministry, most reverends, priests and ministers in office are men. Equally most chairs of the executive-bodies in the respective churches are occupied by men. Consequently, structures, services and theologies appear mainly shaped by male perceptions and aspirations irrespective of the specific type of church. Nevertheless, most churches consist of a majority of women and women established various organisations or created regular meetings as well as worship services for women only. It is in those spaces that women keep exercising various forms and degrees of "ceremonial leadership" (Jules-Rosette)[1], though restricted to the female section of their churches.

The overall picture still portrays female leadership in South African churches as subordinate to dominance until today. The authors of this article illuminate this perception on the base of three case-studies. They present phenomena and developments where women challenged the male pattern of church structures and theologies and took up leadership functions in their respective churches.

Choosing a comparative approach, this article on gender and leadership in South African churches focuses on the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC) and St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission (St. John's) on the one hand as African Instituted Churches (AIC) serving a constituency of the formerly discriminated Black population. On the other hand, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as one of the so-called mainline or historic churches represents a formerly powerful and politically influential church with a White-only constituency.

In our three case-studies different types of leadership are analysed. On the

one hand, we focus on "ceremonial leadership" interpreted as charismatic power via prophetic vision or visionary experience as well as ritual performance. On the other hand legal or institutional forms of leadership are considered. Analysing these forms of leadership we put them in the historical context of political and social developments in South Africa. We ask under what kind of circumstances various types of female leadership occurred and in which way they influenced the churches.

By way of introduction, the following scheme arises: In the NBC the phenomenon of female visionary power occurred during the 1960s and 1970s when Apartheid became firmly consolidated and resistance almost completely silenced. In that time two prophetesses - Ma Dainah Zama and Ma Mpungose - took up charismatic leadership by the proclamation of visions. Ma Mpungose even strived for legal power, but remained largely unsuccessful. In the 1990s when Black power was politically gained, female leadership decreased.

St. John's was founded by Christina Nku at a time when industrialisation brought about Black urbanisation and marginalisation. In this context Christina Nku performed her charismatic gifts as a healer. In the 1970s, at the height of Apartheid, her claim to legal power was usurped by her former supporter Masango who accumulated charismatic and legal power and enforced male leadership on the dominating branch of St. John's. However, in the early 1990s female leadership re-emerged in persona of Christina Nku's daughter Lydia August. As a trained theologian she managed in an arising new South Africa with gender-sensitivity on its agenda to head the original, but now side-lined branch of St. John's for a short period of time. Yet, Lydia August as an example of female leadership remained an exception.

Women in the DRC appeared completely limited to their own circles with regard to any kind of leadership until the 1980s. Until then the church kept closely allied with the political leadership of the Apartheid state. Only when that regime was thrown into crisis in the 1980s and eventually collapsed church started to change rules and to open up to charismatic as well as legal forms of power exercised by women – at least in theory.

## The Eviction of Female Charismatic Power from the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC)

The first example to reconsider "ceremonial leadership" is given with the Nazareth Baptist Church (NBC), is widely known after the founding prophet, Isaiah Shembe (c. 1870-1935), as the Shembe Church. Shembe, who was brought up in the Harrismith district, settled in Natal in the aftermath of the 1906 Bambatha rebellion. In 1910, the last militant anti-colonial resistance still resonating through the countryside, he established his church headquarters, the holy city of *Ekuphakameni* (the "Elevated Place"), in Inanda outside Durban. Since his death

in 1935, the succession in church leadership rested in the Shembe family. The first to inherit the charismatic authority of Isaiah Shembe was his oldest son, Johannes Galilee Shembe (1936-1976). After his death a severe succession conflict escalated into a violent confrontation. As a result, the church split into two branches. The majority of members congregated around Isaiah's second son, Amos Khula Shembe (1976-1995), whereas the minority section supported the claims for leadership of a son of J.G. Shembe, Londa Shembe (1976-1989). Since his death in 1989 this minority section remained for several years without a formal leadership. Only in 1998 Vukile Shembe (b. 1980) was, in accordance with his father's last will, ordained as church leader. Meanwhile, in the main branch of the NBC, a minor succession conflict arose for several months after A.K. Shembe had passed away in October 1995. His only son, Vimbeni Shembe (b. 1933), summoned most support and the leadership irritations ended by mid-1996 without further consequences for the main NBC-branch. Although Vimbeni Shembe attempted to reunite both the church branches separated since 1976, the schism lasts until today.[2]

However, the split did not undermine the attraction of the NBC to a manifold African constituency. Isaiah Shembe and all his successors alike had gained high reputation as religious leaders and healers. This church furthermore is characterised by distinguished features of liturgical performance and ritual action. It comprises a yearly pilgrimage in January to a holy mountain, which is unique in the whole of Southern Africa, and furthermore regular dance festivals with a climax in July. Consequently, in their long-term dynastic efforts the emerging church branches succeeded in covering the whole of Natal and Zululand with a dense net of mission outstations and regional centres. Thus, the NBC formed part of the area's sacred topography as a religious body purely dominated by male power.

## Female Prophecy in Transition and Crisis

In order to interpret female prophetic activity in the NBC we can draw on a considerable collection of oral narratives, arranged in the 1980s and published in the 1990s.[3] Material from public archives and from private collections supplements this official oral history of the NBC.[4] A critical comparison of these sources provides some insight in the church policy of remembrance. More significantly, it reveals a removal of visionary female power from church memory.

Prophetic female activity accompanies the sensitive transition periods of succession in church leadership. Prophetesses either legitimised the political status of the new leader or they disputed his leadership ambitions. The first period in question refers to the late 1930s when J.G. Shembe succeeded the founder prophet Isaiah Shembe. At that time, the church constituency considered him by and large as a still young and in church matters inexperienced academic[5] who had distanced himself from the mostly illiterate followers of his father. In his

efforts to gain full legitimacy, J.G. Shembe was firmly supported by certain female "angels" of the church.

According to Amos K. Shembe, leader of the majority section of the NBC after the death of J.G. Shembe, the activity of these "angels" emerged in the period 1935 to 1938.[6] They claimed visions of the late Isaiah Shembe. In 1941, in his first encounters with the NBC as a researcher, Bengt Sundkler stumbled upon some hymns that, according to his interview partners, were composed by Isaiah Shembe "after his death" received by the "angels" through such visions. The hymns were included in early editions of the NBC-hymnbook but later removed from it (Sundkler 1961: 284; Schlosser 1958: 276; Oosthuizen 1967: 191). The "angels" obviously adopted a kind of prophetic activity and dealt with leadership issues. They backed J.G. Shembe against suspicions from the established hierarchy. Although these prophetesses guided J.G. Shembe through his first years as a leader, even in early oral accounts the female "angels" remained nameless and subsequently vanished from church memory.

The next critical period in the NBC-church history came with the succession conflict after the death of J.G. Shembe in 1976. Already during the last years of his leadership as well as afterwards two prophetesses with characteristic theological profiles raised their voices to direct the church policy. The first was Ma Dainah Zama who entered the official version of Nib's oral history. The second, Ma Mpungose, started her own splinter-group after she had been excommunicated. All we know about the two protagonists is that they were presumably of similar age, operated during some decades in church history, and, finally, they represented opposing parties in the succession conflict.

## Charismatic Prophecy and Political Vision

Accounts of oral history reveal that Ma Dainah Zama operated as a prophetess from her home, located in the southern Harding district of KwaZulu-Natal. From time to time, she was directed by divine call to the distant headquarter of the NBC, *Ekuphakameni*. Her prophecy, thus, infiltrated the central sacred space close to Durban from the regional periphery of the church. Ma Dainah Zama's prophetic voice did not constantly interrupt the community life in *Ekuphakameni*, but occurred in sequences during several decades when she was filled with visionary experiences. Her claims to act as a messenger of *Mvelinqangi* (God) dated back at least to the early 1960's. According to oral tradition, she wanted to influence the development of the NBC under the leadership of J.G. Shembe by pointing to the original vision of the founder-prophet, Isaiah Shembe (Hexham&Oosthuizen 2001: 1-8). In this regard she not only referred to liturgical settings, but also to the social ethos and the political diaconia of the church.[7]

From the mid-1960's Ma Dainah Zama's prophecy was preoccupied with a clear political message that combined the imagination of a collective Zulu iden-

tity with the establishment of a Zulu National Church. She clearly renewed an option that had almost erupted the political history of the late 1920's and early 1930's when Isaiah Shembe was presented in African discourse as the able protagonist of a future Zulu National Church. This project of a Zulu National Church once aimed to restore the political legitimacy of the Zulu royal house and formed part of the resurgence of a Zulu nationalism. Ideologically the vision of a Zulu National Church was carried on the waves of a politicised ethnicity. The African intelligentsia constructed a glorified Zulu past with a very popular imagery of the Zulu as an exceptional warrior nation. Those years, when Isaiah Shembe was considered the protagonist of a Zulu National Church, marked the zenith of his public recognition as a religio-political leader. It ended nevertheless with a long-term interruption of relationship between the NBC and the Zulu royal house.[8]

In the 1960's Ma Dainah Zama revitalised the topic of a Zulu National Church. Nevertheless, the political agenda of the day did not feature prominently in the history of politicised ethnicity. The conception of Zuluness did not bear the ideological urgency than in a generation before or in the 1970's with the formation of the Inkatha movement but existed "in a much looser form" and in a "broadly agreed-upon" collective identity.[9] In this stage of Zulu ethnicity Ma Dainah Zama merged this low-key Zulu identity with the political ideology of a Zulu monarchy (still not fully restored in the 1960's) and linked it again with the idea of a Zulu National Church that she saw embodied in the NBC.

Her vision passed the boundaries of the religious space of her church when Ma Dainah Zama even approached traditional political authorities. Yet, her narrative of a future political architecture did not encompass this specific invention of a Zulu nationalism that imagined a heroic and golden past. Referring to African history her prophecy accused the whole genealogy of the Zulu monarchy of being responsible for "wars and blood shedding", or for a history of failure that does not earn political "authority" *per se*. In straight terms she told her audience that "This kingdom ... will not be a restoration of the old Zulu kingdom. Now begins a new and different kingdom" under the auspices of the NBC (Hexham & Oosthuizen 2001: 2; 4).[10]

Ma Dainah Zama directed the revival of the idea of a Zulu National Church, as already mentioned, to the political intuitions of Isaiah Shembe. Claiming the *kairos* of judgment, she announced: "Now, the trumpet shall sound, because the days have come that this nation will be liberated under the law of God". And then she explained the real motives nourishing her idea of a National Church. This unified church "which is different to the church of the Whites" would help "to liberate us from the hands of the Whites".

Clearly, on the heyday to forge Apartheid Ma Dainah Zama's prophecy took on the apocalyptic urgency to desire a different political system. As constituent of the National Church she stressed the social ethos of Isaiah Shembe who once

proclaimed economic autonomy by educational self-improvement and a land policy to avoid migrant labour and to protect an independency from the centres of the established market economy. Taken from the oral record, Ma Dainah Zama raised her voice against J.G. Shembe who, according to her insights, did no longer adhere to the Nib's memory of former political pretensions. In open disagreement with his leadership she asked: "Where are all these things today?" (ibid.: 4).

With regard to the distancing undertones over against J.G. Shembe, it might seem surprising that Ma Dainah Zama was incorporated into the Nib's oral history. First of all, Ma Dainah Zama's religious and political prophecy reminds on the era of the church founder himself that was still alive amongst many church members. To be more precise: her message represents an affirmative and orthodox restoration of the theology of Isaiah Shembe as it was proclaimed during the time of the collection of these layers of oral tradition.

Secondly, the integration of Ma Dainah Zama's prophecy in the oral church history is due to the succession conflict in the NBC in the late 1970s. Ma Dainah Zama was preoccupied with the destiny of the schism and supported the actual policy of reuniting the church. She took a strong prophetic point of view that legitimised the leadership of Amos K. Shembe. Alluding to the recent history of "war" in the NBC she sent out warning messages towards the minority branch of Londa Shembe and reminded them: "We wear the white gown, but not the gown of blood" (ibid.: 6).

To strengthen her viewpoint, she had abandoned her critical stance towards Londa Shamble's father, the late J.G. Shembe and made him prominent as the last representative of a common church body. Therefore, we only find traces of her prophetic identity in the oral tradition of the main (A.K. Shembe) branch of the NBC. Yet, Ma Dainah Zama's charismatic weight has been confined "to introduce this period of church history [i.e. of J.G. and A.K. Shembe] to illustrate the socio-religious background of life and thought in this movement" (ibid.: 1).

## Charismatic Rebirth and Symbolic Inversion

The loss of visionary female experience as an integral part of church memory is even more evident in the case of Ma Mpungose. The prophetess has been erased from the official memory of the NBC and the shape of her theological profile is more rudimentary.[11] It seems that she revived the tradition of the above mentioned "angels", though her motivations to act as a prophetess remain erratic. Nonetheless, the remaining sources allow us to depict a public figure who wanted to redirect the policy of her church. In contrast to Ma Dainah Zama Ma Mpungose did not primarily believe in the plausibility of 'ideo-logical' arguments. In order to interfere with the orientation of the NBC she first of all saw a need to delegitimise the male hierarchy, and secondly she made use of another type of argument, the "argument of images" and of symbolic subversion.[12]

Since she became a member of the NBC in the early 1960s, Ma Mpungose was a resident of *Ekuphakameni*. There, people consulted her at home and respected her advice: For many she showed prophetic qualities.[13] Compared to Ma Dainah Zama, Ma Mpungose did not speak as a messenger of God but rather acted as Isaiah Shamble's medium. She introduced her dictum with words that pointed to him as the source of her authority, like: "Babankulu (Great Father) says", or: "The iNkosi (the Lord) said". And then her visions would recall all the deviations from the original design of the church in the course of its actual history. To abandon this history of decline and to join in the path paved by the founder, her enactment of Isaiah Shamble's visions bore a rather legalistic dimension. In "Babankulu's" name she threatened with sanctions against all those who would not adhere to his/her original law and she deliberately would cover the church with a number of excommunications.

To gain support Ma Mpungose argued to stabilise the social cohesion of the NBC. Either she urged the church to harmonise rituals from wedding customs to the ordination of pastors or she directly criticised a whole range of neglect of specific religious laws that covers the whole set of liturgical necessities in the NBC. She was especially preoccupied with the "garments of Heaven", examining the correct ritual dress of all the age-groups and gender-sections in the NBC. Her zeal to cleanse the church from deviations, obviously, took an anti-Western rhetoric. In her view the "garments of Heaven" functioned as the religious criteria of difference to the historic churches: "This is not the American Board Mission. Wearing trousers will shut the Doors of Heaven to you."[14]

The hidden memory of Ma Mpungose in the NBC brings a prophetic appearance to surface again that focuses more on ceremonial aspects of religious life than on politically inspired aspirations as in the case of Ma Dainah Zama. Ma Mpungose's prophetic theology aims at preserving the genuine identity of the NBC in the religious landscape pleading for ritual purity and the need for cleansing. She suggested ritual innovations in a rigid form underpinned by the apocalyptic vision of the Last Day, the Day of God's Judgement.

Furthermore, by her conviction of being chosen to reinforce the will of Isaiah Shembe Ma Mpungose took a step that Ma Dainah Zama never dared to take. When she endeavoured to identify heretics she did not frighten away from addressing the male-dominated church hierarchy. Endowed with an unparalleled self-certainty, Ma Mpungose accused the upper-level of ministers of breaking the laws of *Ekuphakameni*. "Angels walk on this yard. Yet you frighten them", disobeying the sacred ground. "What will you say for yourself on the Last Day?"[15]

Concerning church policy, Ma Mpungose obviously confronted even the current leader, J.G. Shembe, and the way, organised the expansion of the NBC. In the course of time he had given more weight to certain headquarters of the church. His eagerness to regionalise the church had caused some turmoil in the NBC so that, following some oral sources, even the unity of the NBC was endan-

gered. In order to strengthen ties with the Zulu royal house, promoters of the regional Zululand church headquarter, *iLinda* ("the Waiting"), intended to develop it as the sacred place of the NBC. It is even stated that this faction intended to "bring the sacred bones" (i.e. Isaiah Shamble's grave) from *Ekuphakameni* here to *Linda* ... In the course of time, the Zulu people will also have their mountain (i.e. the equivalence to the Nhlangakazi mountain) here" (Hexham & Oosthuizen 2001: 278-279). Indeed, these layers of the NBC-oral history give preference to the Zululand centre and they maintain to take over functional aspects of *Ekuphakameni*. In a way, what Richard Werbner calls an organisational dispute between regionalism and a „central place competition" had started within the NBC.[16]

In this situation of open controversy about the future identity of the church, Ma Mpungose took a viewpoint of her own. Contrary to the Zululand faction[17], and contrary also to the establishment of several regional headquarters favoured by J.G. Shembe, she opted for the continuation of a policy of centralisation at the original sacred place, *Ekuphakameni*. To underline her stance, Ma Mpungose´s prophetic ingenuity invented a completely new argument of images: She performed as Isaiah Shembe *revividus*. Stressing her intimate connection with the charismatic church founder, Ma Mpungose was wearing habits, gowns and dance uniforms that resembled those Isaiah Shembe once wore. Whereas she introduced very strict rules for the use of ceremonial garb in the NBC, in her own outfit she thus transgressed the gendered use of attire by symbolic inversion.[18] With this extraordinary *bricolage* Ma Mpungose subverted the leadership qualities of J.G. Shembe still supported by her secret visions that revealed the "unknown Isaiah Shembe". As the medium of Isaiah Shembe, Ma Mpungose had crossed another frontier in supernatural experience: The voice of Shembe had become the bodily identity of Isaiah Shembe.

Her prophetic action condensed in the time just before the death of J.G. Shembe 1976.[19] Eventually, during the years of contested succession, Ma Mpungose even claimed her own ambitions to lead the church. Very active in opposing A.K. Shembe, she first sided with Londa Shembe who authorised her prophetic gifts. Thus, in the process of open conflict Ma Mpungose gained reputation as a prophetess from a male oriented hierarchy she had challenged all her life as the medium of Isaiah Shembe. But when she realised that Londa,s support among the NBC was rather weak, she left the church surrounded by followers who trusted in her leadership qualities.[20] Guiding a group of several hundred people, she started her own church in the late 1970s, a splinter church that has since then been deleted from the oral memories of the other NBC branches. She opened her headquarter in Ndwedwe, approximately 50 km north of *Ekuphakameni*. After almost a decade her church suffered a severe blow and disintegrated when she passed away in 1988.[21]

## Substitution of Female Charismatic Leadership

In comparison to the former situations of crisis in the NBC, in the 1990s no female prophetic voice echoed in the sacred spheres of the NBC. When in 1995 Vimbeni Shembe succeeded his father A.K. Shembe in the leadership of the main branch, his ascendance to leadership was not undisputed. Vimbeni's opponent, Nyathikazi Shembe, did not appeal to a big constituency in the NBC. He therefore tried to back his leadership claim by a strong juridical position as an acknowledged member of the trustees who handled all matters in connection with the premises of the NBC. In this capacity he sometimes had even acted as a personal representative of A.K. Shembe. As a supplementary strategy, he claimed legal power by support from outside the church. On 5th November 1995, Nyathikazi Shembe was ordained as Bishop of the NBC by Rev. I.P.B. Mokoena who acted as the illustrious "life-president" of the Reformed Independent Churches Association (RICA). This alliance, in fact, envisaged to stabilise a chord of power tradition that reminded on the turbulent succession of the late A.K. Shembe himself: It was the same Rev. Mokoena who finally enthroned A.K. Shembe in September 1978.[22] Nonetheless, the tie with the now almost defunct RICA, which kept in touch with the government in the Apartheid period, did not achieve a relevant result in the succession conflict of the NBC.[23]

Although, at the end, it turned out to be a minor conflict, one religious feature in this succession dispute is remarkable. Unlike all other succession conflicts in the life of the church, there were no visionary "angels" in sight, nor was the voice of a prophetess to be heard. Instead, in order to secure his own leadership position, Vimbeni Shembe found support by (partly newly appointed) male representatives of the highest ranks in the church hierarchy. This counselling body formed the so-called executive committee, a feature of legal authority that was not known in the NBC before.[24]

In the competition for power some visions still played an important role – but this time they were exclusively revelations to a few male adherents of A.K. Shembe. These visions that claimed to clarify the succession procedures in the NBC were subsequently approved by the recently formed executive committee. Most important was the support of the new leadership by "*Baba wase Nhlangakazi*", Gqibokubi Henry Shembe (b. 1930), although he was not a member of the executive committee. The "Father of the *Nhlangakazi*" got recognition as a son of Isaiah Shembe in the 1950s and he now holds a respected, though informal position in the NBC acting as a close advisor to Vimbeni Shembe.[25] The dispute was brought to court and settled there in favour of Vimbeni Shembe in 1996.[26]

In conclusion, spontaneous female charismatic authority has been absorbed in the NBC by prevailing male legal authority while the legitimacy of female visionary experience has been substituted by formalised procedures of male power. This result contradicts Sundkler's earlier observation that in comparison to any other social organisation, the AIC give to women "a chance for self-display and

assures [them] of a great measure of power and prestige" (1961: 141). Indeed, the history of the NBC gives evidence of considerable power exercised by women that is rooted in visionary experience. On the one hand, this type of charismatic or prophetic power effects the life of the whole church and sustains for quite long periods in church history. Thus, it exceeds the meaning of "ceremonial leadership" as defined by Jules-Rosette. On the other hand, the aura of visionary female authority is restricted power and it only survives in some sediments of oral church history and needs to be traced through archaeology of memory. In the New South Africa, it seems, the NBC is deprived of any female prophetic voice echoing from inside the NBC.

## Dominance of Male Leadership in a Church Founded by a Woman: The St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission

With a constituency of at least three hundred thousand, perhaps even two million people or more,[27] the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission is the largest AIC in Southern Africa that was founded by a woman. The church was launched by Christina Mokotuli Nku (1894-1988), in the Greater Johannesburg area in the early 1930s.[28] Yet, when Petros Johannes Masango (1906-1984) took over the position of Archbishop of the church in 1970, St. John's had definitely "accommodated itself to the general pattern of male leadership" (Pretorius & Jafta 1997: 221).

The power conflict between the ceremonial leader Christina Nku and the formal leader Petros Masango on the one hand and the succession conflict for formal leadership escalating after Masango's death on the other culminated in two major splits in the church in 1970 and 1997 respectively. As a result, there are at least three prominent legally independent factions: first, the *St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa* headquartered in the Katlehong township in the Greater Johannesburg area, dedicated to Masango and led by Archbishop Jacob Maragu (born in 1922); second, the *Father Masango's St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission*, the major St. John's denomination in the KwaZulu-Natal province although headquartered in Lekokoaneng (Lesotho), led by Archbishop Paul Thabang Matsoso (born in 1932), also dedicated to Masango; third, the *St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa* in the Evaton township in the Greater Johannesburg area, the "Jerusalem" of the original St. John's church which today is still dedicated to Christina Nku.

All factions remain popularly known as "St. John's". Disputes and ensuing divisions are viewed by the congregations primarily as power struggles and conflicts for leadership between men at the top of the hierarchies. Whereas ordinary, dominantly female members still easily move from one faction to the other, the leadership appears divided by an apparently unbridgeable rivalry.[29]

## A Gendered Church

All branches of St. John's are based on a strictly modelled and rigidly applied gender concept which is reflected in the character and outlook of the churches. To begin with, the dominant pattern of male leadership contrasts with the numerical strength of women who outnumber men by at least two to one in terms of membership. While men took a leading role in shaping the church as an institution, women were subordinated to them as helpers and followers. Although they were allowed to become formal leaders of congregations women were largely prevented from taking major roles in the formal church hierarchy. With the exception of Nku's daughter Lydia August (1925-1997) who took a leading role in the formal structure of the church at Evaton after the death of her mother for less than a decade, there is no evidence of a woman climbing higher in the formal hierarchy than to the position of a Reverend (as leader of a congregation).

According to the 1970 constitution of the officially recognised church branch of Masango, female members of St. John's automatically formed Women's Societies at Circuit level.[30] Representatives of these societies were obliged to attend the various higher levels of the church hierarchy but were highly outnumbered by men and could hardly exert influence on the decision-making in the church.

Additionally, St. John's produced a gendered pattern of addressing its leaders. Whereas men are called by their surname like "Baba/Father Masango" women are referred to by their first names, e. g. "Ma/Mother Christina" (Nku). On the one hand, the custom of addressing women in an apparently less distanced manner than men may be taken as an indication of respect and affection for the women concerned. On the other hand, this practice may be criticised on the grounds that it may include a discriminatory notion "in which women are placed in the same category as children" (Masondo 2001: 96). More importantly, the gendered shape of addressing leaders can be interpreted as a method to reinforce the prevailing pattern of male leadership as well as the distinction between formal (male) leadership and ceremonial (female) leadership.[31]

The segregated space of men and women becomes also evident in other aspects of church life. For example, the common worship as well as the architecture of the church buildings are shaped by entries and seating plans that separate men from women. Moreover, female members have their own weekly worship services, including specific rituals of purification. Some rituals are exclusively practised by women who want to get children but cannot give birth.[32] Thus, the St. John's church appears to be largely designed to reproduce und reinforce a gender concept in which differing roles of women and men are ritually confirmed.

Finally, the gendered character of the church is mirrored in its social activities. For example, women come together in order to learn sewing whereas men are taught in groups to make blocks.[33] Again, both men and women are trained in skills which, in terms of gender, are traditionally attributed to them by the

church and its constituencies. This may be interpreted as reflecting the gender pattern of the South African society.

## Female Ceremonial Leadership for Marginalized People

The St. John's church group is unthinkable without the spiritual lifework of Christina Nku. She remains the well respected founder in the theological teaching of every denomination emanating from the splits of 1970 and 1997, despite the severe secular leadership conflicts that were fought at the courts of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid states respectively.[34] Although the branches now dedicated to Masango shifted their religious ambition to him, the founder of the church did not vanish in the tradition of any of them.[35]

Christina Nku was gifted with charisma which enabled her to combine Christian spirituality with forms of traditional healing, taking the way of prayer and the sacramental use of water. Based on her ceremonial capabilities, she did not only found the church but also gave the impetus to the inauguration of the first church building at Evaton in 1952 which became the first headquarters and the "Jerusalem" of the church. In her church, she claimed the position as "Founder and Life General President" (Becken 1986: 93-95). Even after she lost her court case to Masango she repeated that claim, refusing to subordinate what she called her prophecy to secular authorities:

> I cannot obey two masters at the same time. I cannot obey the law and my God. I must disobey one and obey the other. I have decided to obey my God, who gave me the vision and the power to start this church in the name of St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission. I did not start this church out of the blue. I was given directions and guidance by the voices. And I shall stand by my right until death.[36]

In religious terms, Christina Nku grounded the foundation of her church as well as her claim to leadership on divine prophecy that she related to dreams and visions appearing to her when she was repeatedly ill as a young girl starting at the age of twelve. In a vision dated 1914, she allegedly asked God to take her to heaven but was in turn told to stay on earth in order to heal and pray (Becken 1986: 94). Lydia August tended to take this vision as the focal point of the spiritual foundation of the church (August 1994: 209).

To her clients, Christina Nku appeared as a "charming little woman" with a "winsome personality", endowed with divine gifts of healing (Sundkler 1976: 78ff). Given the difficult and deteriorating living conditions of racially discriminated township people in the then Witwatersrand area, she soon became famous for her success as a healer, using blessed water that gained power as a

healing agent and a symbol of salvation. Christina Nku was particularly able to deal with problems of ill-being and sickness which emanated from the economic, social and political transformation of her country – mainly industrialisation, urbanisation and increasing racial segregation – in the 1920s, 1930s and later on (Pretorius & Jafta 1997: 220; Worden 2000: 71).

Her church offered a refuge not only in terms of spiritual relief and comfort but also as a social framework that tended to substitute the networks of extended families which her followers had lost in the course of the above-mentioned processes of economic and social change. In this context, St. John's served as a family-substitute while Christina Nku became its spiritual mother. Subsequently, she was affectionately, but also respectfully, called "Mother Christina" or "Ma Nku" by her followers. By helping people to deal with the challenges of a deteriorating every-day life she did not only strengthen her reputation as a healer but also promoted herself to ceremonial leadership of her own church.

Her aura as a spiritual mother was also closely connected to her status as an African (Sotho) mother of eight children. The esteem for the mother as a "fountain of life" (August 1994: 205) in the African society and in concepts of African tradition largely contributed to the acceptance of Christina Nku's position at the top of the church.[37] The legitimation of the female ceremonial leader was further reinforced by Lydia August in biblical terms when she referred to outstanding women like Eve, Deborah, Hannah, Mary and Mary Magdalene (August 1994: 205).

Notwithstanding her role as a ceremonial leader, Christina Nku was always influenced by and dependent upon men as regards secular issues, especially when it came to the institutionalisation and running of the church. This was mostly due to the fact that the racist system did not allow African women to act as economically independent persons and to exercise formal leadership. Under these circumstances it was up to men to move in and eventually take over the institutional leadership of the church.

## Consolidation of Male Dominance: The Combination of Ceremonial and Formal Politico-jural Leadership under Apartheid

Chronologically, the most important men in Christina's life were her father Enock Belibe, the minister Elias Nkitsing, her husband Lazarus Nku, her eldest son, John Nku, and, periodically, Masango. While her father did not understand her life of sicknesses, dreams and visions, things started to become better for her when, in 1918, she met Elias Nkitsing who was a minister of the racially divided *Apostolic Faith Mission* (AFM), a Pentecostal church initiated by American missionaries in South Africa in 1908 (De Wet 1989).[38] To Christina and her husband Lazarus whom she married in 1920, Nkitsing not only became a spiritually trustworthy

person but also a fatherly friend. Responding to his charisma, Christina and Lazarus Nku eventually decided to join his church as members in 1924 (Anderson 2000: 72; Thomas 2001: 60).

Both Elias and Lazarus helped Christina to establish her own church in organisational terms when she claimed to have received a call by the Holy Spirit to do so. When they died of old age and a railway accident in 1948 and 1949 respectively, Christina Nku shifted her dependency in the institutional running of the church to her son John who became the first Archbishop of the church, on the one hand, and to Petros Johannes Masango whom she healed from serious sickness in 1939, on the other (Mazibuko 1980; Sundkler 1976: 84).

While John Nku (who died in 1977) performed as a weak head of the church controlled by his mother, Masango got reputation not only as a clergyman endowed with charisma but also as a wealthy businessmen who knew much about economic, administration and power mechanisms.[39] In his person spiritual charisma and politico-administrative know-how were symbiotically combined. Masango proved able to perform both ceremonial leadership as well as formal politico-jural leadership in the church. Given his capabilities, he eventually was the one to run the church when Apartheid went to its height and hardships went worse for the African population of South Africa in the course of the 1960s and early 1970s.

The ensuing consolidation of male leadership made it easier for the church to deal with the challenges that emanated from the Apartheid system at a time when the political resistance movement, following the ban of the African National Congress (ANC) in 1960, was heavily weakened. A strengthened hierarchical structure of the church would translate into a reinforced church organisation. Subsequently, this organisation would be put into an improved, although still weak position to negotiate with the Apartheid authorities while at the same time offering a refuge of protection and invigoration to the constituency of St. John's.

Masango took a major role in the running of the church from the early days when the institutionalisation process began. According to the records of his church branch, it was him who "created" the official name of the church in 1941, the year preceding the first unsuccessful application of St. John's for official recognition by the South African government (Mazibuko 1980: 3). While Christina Nku already disposed of the name "St. John's" owing to the visions and dreams she had as a young girl, Masango is said to have proposed to merge the name "St. John's" with that one of the "Apostolic Faith Mission", the church which Christina Nku had joined some 17 years before. Masango had also joined her extended family when he married her niece Anna Seipati (1910-1982) in 1937.[40]

As the institutionalisation of the church progressed, the organisational structures apparently did not suffice to run the church effectively in the Apartheid system. From the point of view of the church "managers" as well as its mostly

female members, it became necessary to have a firm senior male leader on the top of the formal church hierarchy in order to support the female leader (West 1975: 67). Instead of leaving the right to appoint a man of her choice to Christina Nku, the 1960 constitution provided for a semi-democratic modus of elections to determine who was to be the official head of the church in the rank of Archbishop. The constitution, in a written form, was the precondition to official recognition as an African church which was finally granted by the Apartheid government in 1961.[41]

In an election overshadowed by the reproach of manipulation, Masango triumphed over John Nku in August 1970 (Becken 1986: 95).[42] While Christina Nku publicly rejected the outcome of the election and subsequently tried to expel Masango from the church, Masango and his entourage in turn fought trough the validity of the election result at the Supreme Court of the Apartheid state which ruled in favour of his case in 1971 on the condition that another election was held. On May 10th, 1972, Masango who presented himself as the sole candidate was proclaimed the winner by acclamation.[43]

As a consequence of the power conflict the church split. Whereas the Evaton church remained under the control of "Ma Nku" and her son, a new headquarters was founded in Katlehong township near Germiston in Gauteng, and Masango officially became Archbishop of the church (Mazibuko 1980: 11ff). In retrospect, he was probably the strongest leader St. John's ever had.

Under his spiritual guidance, his wife Anna Masango was promoted to "Prophetess" after she had died in 1982 (Mhlongo n. d). In contrast to Christina Nku, however, her status in the St. John's church was not based on her own merit in the first place. Rather, Anna Masango became a ceremonial leader of the church in second position by the unofficial title of a "Lady Archbishop" as the wife of Masango. While the church branches at Katlehong and Lekokoaneng boast of (at least) two "Prophetesses" ever since, Christina Nku remained the only woman accepted in that position in the Evaton branch of St. John's.

## Male-dominated Power Struggle in the Church at the Dusk of Apartheid and in the Process of Democratic Transformation

Whereas Masango remained an undisputed leader of his church branch at Katlehong during his lifetime a severe struggle for succession emerged between (male) bishops of St. John's after the head had died in 1984. Obviously, the church lacked internal mechanisms for conflict mediation but its capacity to resolve the succession conflict was also severely weakened by the general political development of South Africa which was marked by the troubled years of growing political resistance against Apartheid (from 1983 by the *United Democratic Front*/UDF and others), the state of emergency (1985-1990) and the ensu-

ing transition towards a democratic system (from 1990). Given these circumstances, the judiciary power that was once again appealed to by the competitors for church leadership in order to decide upon the succession conflict proved able to do so only in 1997. Then, the democratisation process in South Africa had been consolidated by the inauguration of the first regular constitution of the post-Apartheid state. Finally, a court decision at Pretoria paved the way for an election in the Katlehong branch of St. John's on May 25th, 1997. The poll confirmed Bishop Jacob Maragu to be the legitimate leader of the church in the position of an Archbishop.[44] Maragu had been implicated in the power struggles of the Masango church from 1984 (Becken 1986: 99-100).

Subsequently, a strong faction led by the defeated candidate Paul Thabang Matsoso regrouped as the "Father Masango's St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission". Matsoso also took the position of an Archbishop and established the headquarters of his church branch at his episcopal seat in Lekokoaneng, Lesotho, while the church in the Clermont township of Durban became the South African main base of his branch.

Both leaders did not catch up with the high level in the combination of spiritual charisma and politico-administrative know-how, ceremonial leadership and formal politico-jural leadership in the church as Masango had been able to perform. Yet, both were undoubtedly strong and well-accepted leaders in their respective church branches.

## Female Leadership at Evaton in the Period of Democratic Transformation

While the leadership struggle in the Masango church was settled at the expense of another split, the Evaton branch got new impetus in terms of female leadership in the period of transition towards a democratic South Africa which began only a short time after the death of Christina Nku. Encouraged by the dawn of a post-Apartheid political system, the Evaton church, weakened by the split and the loss of property to the Masango church due to court decisions in the 1970s, started a short-lived revival in the 1990s. Apparently, the collapse of the male-dominated Apartheid system opened up opportunities for women to enhance their participation in the South African society in general and in churches in particular. With the emergence of the New South Africa, a major role in the Evaton branch of St. John's was taken by Lydia August. The daughter of the female founder of the church did not only become the spiritual and executive leader of the Evaton branch but also achieved the official recognition of that church as a second "St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission of South Africa" beside the equally named church of Katlehong.[45] Making use of her reputation as an academic theologian, she established a low-level, yet ambitious institutional theological framework at Evaton which was meant to train and educate minis-

ters. In order to strengthen the position of women, Lydia August used her power and professional knowledge to open up possibilities for ceremonial leadership to female members of the church in general. In contrast to her mother, she even succeeded in taking up formal leadership in the second position of the church hierarchy as a "Vice-Archbishop" while the late Obed Nku, her brother, exercised formal leadership as an Archbishop.[46]

In fact, Lydia August was the one who took charge of the Evaton branch. From her leading position, she acted as a protagonist and on behalf of a growing number of self-confident women in the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission. Lydia August passionately encouraged them to "question the male chauvinism in the church", arguing that "we need to minister to our men folk in the church hierarchies that women need to be ordained and be given full powers in the church equal to men" (August 1994: 206-207). She also argued very much in favour of peace and against violence (ibid.: 205). The new dynamic which empowered women to take ceremonial leadership positions ran parallel to an emancipation process in the South African society after Apartheid. Yet, when Lydia August passed away in 1997, her work almost "died with her".[47] There was no person, either man or woman, who disposed of the aura and charisma to preserve the prophecy of Christina Nku as well as the institutional and theological framework created by Lydia August. Legitimised by descent to her mother, Dorcus Mathe, the only still living daughter of Christina Nku, now became the spiritual head of the Evaton church. But neither she nor the now formal leader Michael Mamatela, both of them in their eighties, did not dispose of the knowledge, power and perspective to lead the church to a sound future.

## The Gendered Notion of Leadership in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC)

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) is generally perceived as a conservative institution in the South African society of today. It remains difficult for the DRC to come to terms with its recent history, mainly with its involvement in the former Apartheid regime. The DRC was widely regarded as an important agent in the invention and re-invention of Afrikaner identity which contributed to the political, economic and cultural dominance of Afrikanerdom in an ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous South African society. The research landscape on Afrikanerdom has turned a remarkably superficial eye on the involvement of women in the invention of Afrikaner nationalism. Only few have made 'white' women the subjects of their research (Hetherington 1993: 161). Marijke du Toit reasoned in her intriguing thesis on the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging (c.1870-1939)*: "Feminist historians, in South Africa and elsewhere, have tended to shy away from studying women too easily dismissed as 'conservative'" (1996: 14).

However, in the rise of gender-studies from the 1980s onwards especially female academics took an interest in Afrikaner women. In a comparative study Gaitskell and Unterhalter (1989: 58-78) assumed that nationalism and particularily Afrikaner nationalism was a "male discourse, shaped by males to serve the interests of males" (Kruger 1991: 74). This argument was strongly contested by du Toit who strengthened Kruger's criticism on the base of empirical data collection and interpretation. In line with Butler (1989: 49–62) and Eisenberg (1987), du Toit doubted that "female Afrikaner nationalists were 'man-made women' who accepted a *volksmoeder* ideal constructed by Afrikaner men" (1996: 7). Drawing from the study of the *Afrikaanse Christelike Vroue Vereniging (ACVV)* in the Cape Province, she concluded that women were, indeed, very actively involved in the shaping of social welfare policy (ibid.: 359). Yet, her extremely valuable research remains limited to pre-Apartheid times. The same applies to Christina Landman's (1994)work on "The Piety of Afrikaans Women", which depicted vividly the religious practise of Afrikaans women throughout the centuries.

In our contribution to the gender study of the DRC and aspects of female leadership we attempt to add some evidence to the discussion of the Apartheid and post-Apartheid eras. Perceptions of female leadership in the DRC today will reveal how DRC-women still contribute to or question Afrikanerdom as an ideology. The analysis is based on comprehensive expert-interviews with mainly male theologians and church-leaders.[48] The interviews included a section on gender relations in the past and today. Furthermore, five interviews with DRC-minister's wives and one interview with one of the first women who joined the leadership ranks of the DRC accomplish the material.[49] All but one were born in the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s. They grew up at the dawn of Apartheid, got married and started their professional careers in the 1950s when Apartheid was legally and practically established. Two retired in the 1990s when South Africa entered a period of democratic transformation. Only one interviewee, born in the early 1950s, was younger. Her witness allows one to reflect newer tendencies in the gender discourse of the White DRC. The interviews with the minister's wives revealed that leadership by women was exclusively exercised in the women's organisations until the 1980s.

The status of these organisations within the official DRC and the mere existence of an unpaid role such as the minister's wife up to recently illuminate the form of hierarchy and the gender concept the DRC constructed in the past. Only from the 1980s onwards formal politico-jural authority was admitted to women step by step by allowing them to become deacons, then elders and to enter the ministry since 1990. This process was accompanied by growing ambiguity on the role of a minister's wife. Women, married to DRC-ministers, started to reject the automatic assumption of leadership amongst DRC-women, but often pursued their professional careers instead. However, since 1990 only few women got

ordained and/or made their way to the top structures of the DRC. A comparative analysis of the interpretation of this development by men and women alike will reveal whether perceptions differ due to gender-shaped positions.

## Leadership in Women's Space

Up to the General Synod of the DRC in 1982 women were formally excluded from the DRC leadership on all levels. In 1982 they were granted the right to take up the office of a deacon, at the General Synod in 1986 women were admitted to the office of an elder and in 1990 they were allowed to enter the ministry. Until then representatives of the various separate women's organisations could participate in synodical gatherings only in small numbers. The new development from the 1980s onwards coincided with political developments when the Apartheid government started to offer political rights to some population groups though to a limited extent (e.g. tri-cameral parliament). In a quite similar way the DRC opened their doors for women to become elders and deacons, but yet not ministers. Thus, this process of cautious integration started to take place at all venues of Afrikanerdom concerning all kinds of formerly excluded groups. However, this model caused rejection and conflict in the political sphere as well as on clerical grounds. With regard to the DRC in particular the role of the minister's wife and the various women's organisations changed.

The main women's organisations of the DRC were the *Vrouediens* and the *Vroue Sending Bond* (Women's Missionary Society). They had branches in each congregation which were usually headed by the minister's wives until the 1980s. Thus, minister's wives got into leadership positions amongst DRC-women on the merit of marriage to a DRC-minister for a long time.

In the activities of the *Vroue Sending Bond* the role of women as social agents can be detected: here a lot of funds were raised and given "for instance to crêches and homes for orphans and building of churches for Coloured people, paying extra money towards their salaries."[50] Thus, via the *Vroue Sending Bond* the DRC provided charitable support to other population groups to relief them from some hardships like child-care while the mothers were working in the White areas. The *Vroue Sending Bond* helped to establish homes for orphans who had lost their parents due to bad living-conditions or even violence which was often related to state activity. Funds were also needed to build churches in the newly allocated areas for the Indian, Coloured and Black population groups during the 1960 and 1970s. Thus, charitable activity performed in the townships by the *Vroue Sending Bond* contributed to the implementation of Apartheid.

The *Vrouediens* published a newsletter and organised talks on provincial level. Here the DRC's understanding on gender-related issues filtered through. One woman remarked:

> They weren't, you know, intellectual. They concentrated on talks, pink bookies, you know a woman is like that and you must pamper a woman, you know all women-like things they nourished there ... Children was a very important topic. You must take your time with the children.[51]

The *Vrouediens* obviously promoted a role-model where women were responsible for home, children and charity (cf. *Vroue Sending Bond*) whereas the men's world included politics, theology and other society related issues. Yet, most interview-partners remarked that times have changed dramatically in this respect. A female voice commented that

> Nowadays a lot of women in the church, church-women, the younger people, they are all working ... But they don't want the *Vrouediens* any more.[52]

Apparently, the increasing professional involvement of women in the South African society made DRC women of a younger generation to opt for women's involvement in the church on a level equal to men, instead of sustaining a separate space for women in the DRC as represented by the *Vrouediens* and the role of the minister's wife. Again this development seems to mirror the political process towards a democracy which involves all population groups as individuals on an equal level.

## The Role of the Minister's Wife

What did it mean to be a minister's wife? One woman in the position defined:

> You had to take the initiative amongst the women and once a week you had a women's prayer meeting and then we had what we call 'Vrouediens', it's a women auxiliary type of organisation and you had to take all the initiatives there. And you had to do a lot with fundraising as well.[53]

Thus, minister's wives did not only organise prayer meetings, but also served as a connecting link between their respective congregations and the *Vrouediens* and the *Vroue Sending Bond*.

In addition some of the minister's wives became active in the various women's organisations on provincial or national level. One interviewee became secretary of the Southern Transvaal branch of the *Vroue Sending Bond* in the 1970s. Another signed responsible for the distribution of the *Vrouediens* newsletter in the Western Cap branch. Usually they did not get financially remunerated for their activities. They rather performed voluntary social work of semi-profes-

sional character. However, some of the DRC's minister's wives as well as DRC-women in general were employed on a professional basis in other DRC-related organisations. Thus, one interviewee worked as a social worker for the *Christelike Maatskaplike Dienste*, a welfare-organisation of the DRC. In only one case the DRC also created a space for a professional career in social work.

For student minister's wives roles were slightly different. Two interview partners agreed that their role was to "entertain the students" which mainly meant to bake cakes and to open their homes for their meetings. Coming from an ordinary congregation one of the interviewees regarded this involvement in an academic milieu as a relief and intellectual enrichment, whereas the younger woman commented on her role:

> He [the husband] was ordained, but you were actually an extension of him. And I hated that too, because I wanted my own identity.[54]

Obviously the role of the minister's wife started to become disputable. Another interviewee remarked:

> Nowadays ... many of the ministers' wives are professional, so they just go on and some of the women in the congregation go on with the Vrouediens and all these things.[55]

Evidently, the role of the minister's wife is not taken up by all women married to DRC ministers any longer. With respect to professionalisation and general aspects this development is partly due to an emancipation process in the South African society which is reflected in the admittance of DRC women to offices such as deacons, elders and ministers in the 1980s and beginning 1990s. To sum up: the interview partners painted a picture of the contemporary DRC where women's organisations such as the *Vrouediens* were regarded as outdated in their function to create a separate space for women. Consequently the role of the minister's wife equally became more insignificant: since separate women's space is not needed any longer, leaders of the traditional DRC women's organisations have become displaced.

## Women in the Leadership of the Church

All interview partners, men and women alike, agreed that there is a need for the inclusion of women in the DRC-leadership. Johann Kinghorn viewed this development as part of Afrikaner society entering into the era of modernisation.[56] Another male interviewee contextualised the process as an integral part of democratisation:

> Churches are becoming more democratic and I think that goes hand in hand with opening for women to play a leading role.[57]

Yet, all interviewees conceded that though formally women are admitted to all positions, the DRC is still facing a dead-lock in practice. A conference in 1999 on women in the DRC clearly brought to light that only few female theologians get ordained and even fewer head congregations. A female theological professor argued that

> The synod made these decisions without this being practised in the churches already and without women being part of those discussions ... So many, many church councils were not ready to respond to that, they were not ready to call women.[58]

A male interviewee from the Uniting Reformed Church assumed a more theological reason. According to his view the teaching in the DRC "that a woman has to be submitted to her husband" contributed to the lack of female leadership and still prevails in the mentality of the DRC-members on the ground-level. A professor in dogmatics at one of the DRC's theological seminaries revealed practical as well as gender-related reasons for the resistance by the church councils:

> There are more practical problems or things that make it a bit more difficult for a housewife and a mother of children to do full ministry in the church. In that sense there is a difference between men and women. But if one can make arrangements in that regard, then I think, they have a very important role to play.[59]

Interestingly, he remained rather vague on the kind of arrangements he envisaged. An inclusive model of shared housework and shared upbringing of children was not imagined. Instead, a model was favoured where women are formally admitted to all offices, but remain prohibited from entering top structures of the DRC easily due to the inclusive expectation to fulfil their roles as mothers and housekeepers in addition.

Most observers agreed that change in the DRC did and does not keep pace with change in the South African society in general. According to the perception of a female interview partner

> They [men-dominated church councils] still see women, and that is the problem, as separate beings in their midst. Most men serving on church councils have not yet made a con-

> scious mental move towards accepting that women can also make contributions in general church context.[60]

The same interviewee high lightened that women, by the prevailing pattern of education, are not well prepared to take leadership positions in the church:

> If, however, she is elected, she feels insufficient because she has never been empowered to play a role in the church. The result is that she often does not have the confidence to participate in the discussion.[61]

A female pioneer in the DRC top structures confirmed that only few women in the DRC were well prepared to take up official offices when she reasoned about her own assignment into leadership:

> And this is because I am vocal ... and because I am not afraid to speak out which is rare for women in this country, particularly on church affairs.[62]

Asked whether they expected change due to an increase in female DRC-leadership, men remain rather shallow. One of the DRC's top officials viewed women in the ministry as individuals which sometimes performed well according to the given standards, while others would rather badly attend to the requested pastoral role. Accordingly he neither expected nor welcomed a differing type of leadership or differing visions for the DRC resulting from the gender history of the leading agents.[63]

Quite differently scholars from the Uniting Reformed Church, arguing from a historical perspective, positively expected women in the DRC-leadership to become agents of change within their church.

> They didn't come in as those that had power; they come in as all of us from outside in a sense saying, now we are coming into power, what does it mean to be in these situations? And to be more aware of your vulnerabilities, more aware, more humble about your role in society than those who would have been running the wars for so long. I think, they will be a better group of people to work with. I can't wait for some of them to come into higher forms of leadership within that church.[64]

Here two aspects were taken as crucial: first the mere fact that women enter leadership positions was linked with expectations to make a difference. The interviewee who is one of the first women in the DRC top structure confirmed

that being without a history of power bears the following advantage:

> I would make a difference. Simply because I know nothing. I don't play the man; I always play the issue because I don't know the men.[65]

Secondly with respect to the aspect of vulnerability a similar approach was produced by one of the younger DRC-ministers:

> The lack of risk-taking, of hospitality, because they did not just exclude women, they excluded 'womenness'. A lot of that made the church inhuman [like] the unwillingness to show brokenness and to really think about healing ... If the church doesn't use men and women as that kind of compassion and really take up that type of ethics of compassion again, then I don't see a future for the church without that.[66]

Yet, the two proponents differed: whereas the first viewed women as the better agents of change within the DRC because they do not come from a history of power, the second regarded women and men regardless of gender-shaped connotations as possible agents of an ethic of compassion in which hospitality and the need to show and heal brokenness lay at its centre. Nevertheless, both agreed on the acceptance of and focus on brokenness and vulnerability as necessary new dimensions in the DRC of today.

The female interview partners viewed differences to be expected by female church leadership more in practical terms: two expected

> More practical things, not so much talk, because women do something ... And I think the whole church will change then because the women will say we can't just talk, we must do ... Because women are more practical, men are more intellectual.[67]

Furthermore, one female voice attributed to women a greater ability to reach out to people which she shared with a previous remark of one of the experts on hospitality. Another added

> It is more looking from a woman's perspective, emotional side, I think the church is quite rational.[68]

Vast differences in the evaluation of gender-shaped leadership become obvious: whereas older male DRC representatives turned a blind eye on the implications

of the history of gender-relations for female leadership in the DRC, male interviewees from the Uniting Reformed Church together with a younger representative of the DRC focussed on the shared experience of vulnerability and brokenness. In contrast the women, regarded emotionality, efficiency as well as communication and social skills as their qualities worthwhile to be pushed into the centre of the DRC.

Here the historical dimensions of gender-related experiences reveal themselves. DRC-men had always been in the position of power in politics and in the church. For them to deny the history of gender relations which privileged them unambiguously serves the status quo. Men from less privileged backgrounds who had been discriminated by the political system of Apartheid however viewed DRC-women with their experience of limited power as the better partners on the way to equal structures. They hoped that they would be more sensitive to dominant behaviour and strategies and therefore be more capable of relationships on an equal level. Yet, their reference to a common experience of exclusion is not free of a gender-related ambiguity: their own ambitions made them define female qualities which evidently differed to quite a large proportion to the self-perception of DRC-women themselves. Men of whatever background still automatically assumed the right to define what it is to be a woman.

The women in contrast referred to strengths rather than to weaknesses. They imagined the DRC as a place where efficiency and emotionality in combination with communication and social skills set the tone. In their view male focus on rationality, bureaucracy and static dogmatically orientated discourses needs to be overcome. In line they did not define themselves as broken and feeble entities with the need to be healed. Quite in contrast the female interviewees rather regarded women as the more able actors of change within the DRC due to their already specified skills. They viewed their strengths as better equipment for the challenges posed by the new South Africa compared to those of their male partners. Thus, the female interviewees accepted the newly integrated role of women in the DRC full-heartedly. They attributed less importance to the role of the minister's wife and envisaged a church with women in leadership positions because they hoped that their gender-shaped qualifications would serve the needs of an integrated South Africa better than those of their male partners. They valued skills which would serve the need to bridge vast differences in language, cultural attirements and historical backgrounds. There is evidence that a considerable amount of DRC-women start to perceive themselves as integral part of a multifarious South Africa rather than as agents of an exclusive Afrikanerdom. This thesis is supported by the observation that all female interviewees favoured church unification with the *Uniting Reformed Church in South Africa*, the former loosely linked DRC-family. This development moves parallel to the political and social process of integration in the post-Apartheid era. As long as the Apartheid state was in place both the DRC and the Apartheid regime were dominated

by 'white' males. Only in times of decreasing power women gained *de jure* opportunities to influence the church by forms of ceremonial as well as politico-jural leadership. Nevertheless, *de facto* the DRC is still denying these very same opportunities to their female theologians and members today.

## Conclusion

In our case studies on the NBC, St. John's and the DRC we identified a gendered pattern of leadership and hierarchy structures. In order to draw conclusions, we summarise some of the major features:

### *1) NBC*

Concerning its hierarchical structures, the Shembe Church remained male-dominated from the start till the present. There was hardly room for female ceremonial leadership except in short periods of crisis. Especially in the 1960s and early 1970s two women were able to extent ceremonial power and influenced the spiritual development and political stature of the church. Yet, both women endowed with charismatic authority became marginalised within church memory.

The active period of these two prophetesses in the NBC on the one hand coincided with serious crises of male leadership in the church. Since male leadership was pre-occupied with power-struggles within its own ranks, female visionaries discussed the roles attributed to men and women through religious socialisation. Most obvious in the case of Ma Mpungose, she challenged the male hierarchy of the NBC through female prophecy and the strategy observed was that of symbolic inversion of gendered relations.

On the other hand, their prophetic action participated, though in differing degrees, in the formation of a collective identity in the political realm from the 1960s. Regarding the persistent re-invention of Zulu ethnicity it developed under the auspices of *Inkatha* into a Zulu nationalism that tended to strengthen Zulu identity against the then consolidated Apartheid system, although subordinating to its political logic (Engel 1997). Though Zulu nationalism served the principle of ethnic segregation underlying Apartheid, it presented a source to regain pride and to counter dehumiliation at the same time. Furthermore, it strengthened Zulu/African identity as opposed to 'White' dominance.

The case study of the two NBC prophetesses contributes to the gender dimension of ethnicity. According to Maré the gender aspect in connection with the ethnic mobilisation is both still "under-researched and under-theorised" (1992: 46-47).[69] The construction of an ethnic Zulu identity was throughout its history the ideological project of a male African political intelligentsia. One of the visionaries, Ma Dainah Zama, even anticipated this discourse and brought in a new dimension: She linked political and cultural key elements of the Zulu past with the Zulu monarchy and added the critical connection to the NBC as arbiter

of the common heritage. In so far Ma Dainah Zama's approach discloses a diversity of identity concepts and an unexpected and unrecorded female voice in the expression of a Zulu nationalism.

In a critical understanding Ma Dainah Zama sought to establish a religious centre over political ideology and thus opened the shaping of a collective identity taking it away from the domain of *Inkatha*. This is even more evident with Ma Mpungose. Her idea of constructing a common church identity was cautious not to merge with 'Zuluism' but always kept the sole option of "liberation from the Whites". In that sense Ma Dainah Zama's and Ma Mpungose's prophecies contributed to the popularisation of resistance ideology and to open up the spaces of political discourse.

### *2) St. John's*

While the Shembe Church did only temporarily admit the emergence of influential prophetesses, St. John's was even rooted in female ceremonial leadership as it was founded by a woman: Christina Nku. Endowed with a high proportion of charisma, she came to offer spiritual help to impoverished and marginalized people of the Greater Johannesburg area at a time when their suffering increased as a result of the first major wave of industrialisation and urbanisation in South Africa, especially in the said area, in the early 1930s. Those people suffered from the consequences of rural-urban migration, the loss of land, identity and traditional social and family surroundings. They also suffered from the introduction and reinforcement of pre-Apartheid mechanisms of racial segregation as well as from their inability to powerful political resistance against the repressive racist regime. Since these afflictions translated into diverse forms of physical and mental ill-being and sickness those people developed a desire and need for physical and spiritual healing. As Christina Nku was able to perform healing that offered a sound combination of Christianity and African tradition she became spiritually attractive to more and more people of her home region.

Although she was the founder of the church, the hierarchy of this same church soon became dominated by men in the process of institutionalisation. In the late 1960s the political resistance movement against Apartheid was weak and the organisational structure of the church not strong enough to cope with the challenge of offering its followers means of empowerment and self-assertion. In reaction to this the church concentrated formal and ceremonial leadership in the hands of one single person who would be able to simultaneously perform charismatic attraction as well as organisational skills, spiritual as well as secular power in the church. Since no woman, given the constraints of gendered education, was able to perform the combination of institutional and ceremonial leadership, it was up to a man, Masango, to do so. Resonating the pattern of male dominance in the Apartheid system, there was no room for a woman to reach the same position at that time.

Yet, when that system collapsed, the position of men in South Africa weakened and new opportunities emerged for women in the South African society to climb to institutional positions that had been closed to them during the period of Apartheid as well as pre-Apartheid times. In the St. John's church Lydia August, the academically educated daughter of Christina Nku, took the opportunity to ascend to formal leadership of the original branch of the church which was separated from the Masango church following a split in the early 1970s. Yet, her church returned to its traditional gendered pattern of formal male leadership following her death. In limited terms, Lydia August may be seen as a protagonist of women climbing to positions in the church hierarchy which are characterized by a combination of spiritual and secular power, of ceremonial and formal leadership.

### *3) DRC*

Given the strength of patriarchal Afrikanerdom and the power of the male-dominated Apartheid system up to the 1980s, there was no room in the DRC for women to attain high positions in the formal hierarchy of the church. Women's leadership were confined to separate spaces of exclusively female circles in the church, including various forms of engagement in social matters. When the weaknesses of the Apartheid system became more and more apparent in the 1980s, eventually leading to its democratic transformation in the early 1990s, this also meant that Afrikanerdom fell into crisis, facing the loss of dominance in the South African society.

Although Afrikanerdom retained influence at the political and societal levels, it was considerably weakened by the democratic transformation of South Africa. Since the system of Apartheid and Afrikanerdom had been dominated by men, change also translated into a severe blow to male dominance. The dynamics of change did not only seize the society in general but also the DRC. Subsequently, starting from the 1980s, women were formally allowed to ascend to positions in the formal church hierarchy. Consequently, segregated space for women and the role of the minister's wife were strongly questioned in the process of modernisation and secularisation of Afrikanerdom from the 1980s onwards.

Furthermore, the structure of the church itself and its hierarchical patterns of behaviour were theoretically challenged by female visions of non-hierarchical channels of communication and a focus on experimental achievements and social skills rather than on rational agreements and mere logic. Thus, it seems that DRC-women tended to question exclusive Afrikanerdom and rather promote a culture of communication instead of dominance. However, although men acknowledged the need of structural change they still upheld dominance by assuming the right to define what female leadership implied.

In general, thus, churches tended during pre-Apartheid and Apartheid times to centralise formal politico-jural authority in the hands of men through a sys-

tematic institutional exclusion of women from that type of church leadership. For women, options of legal authority were mostly confined to the manifold female circles in church life. In cases where women were entitled to participate in the institutional framework of the churches as representatives of these organisations, they were highly outnumbered and marginalised by males. With only rare exceptions, women were generally restricted to "ceremonial leadership" in the churches considered in our analysis.

Only under particular historical circumstances women were able to challenge this pattern. When Apartheid was overwhelmingly strong as a system in the 1960s and early 1970s, female leadership became possible in terms of ceremonial leadership, as could be seen in the case of the NBC which was already relatively strong in terms of dynastic organisational structures at that time. If a church, as St. John's, was still weak as an institution, the concentration of ceremonial and formal leadership in the hands of one single man (Masango) offered a perspective to survive as a church, to face the challenges of the Apartheid system and to create mechanisms of empowerment and self-assertion for the church members. By contrast, no room for female leadership was given at that time in churches which were affiliated to the male-dominated Apartheid system, as in the case of the DRC.

Yet, with the decline of the system, new opportunities emerged for women to attain top positions. Only in exceptional cases, women were even able to challenge male dominance at the level of formal leadership (Lydia August/ St. John's). Since women in all three churches never held leadership for a longer period of time the basis for a gender-focussed analysis of leadership patterns and church structures is still weak in terms of both experience and information.

The case studies reveal that women were able to ascend to leadership positions in the church hierarchy under two historical circumstances: Firstly, at times when the population group represented in the church felt trapped in a position of humiliation and powerlessness against the dominant political (Apartheid) system, the need for a collective identity (expressed either in ethnic terms or in terms of the social cohesion of a church) and self-assertion arose that culminated in healing, a specific area of religious representation traditionally attributed to femaleness (Cheater 1986: 76). Consequently, leadership opportunities became available to women in those times of affliction. Secondly, at times of rapid social and political change when old structures and ideologies were fundamentally questioned, the traditional order of gender-relations was also strongly challenged. In such turmoil, space for experiences was opened up to women beyond old positions. However, as South Africa so far did not experience longer periods of considerable female leadership the durability of female leadership in the churches remained rather limited, too.

## Notes

1 Drawing from her research on AIC Jules-Rosette coined the notion of "ceremonial leadership" which is understood as control of authority limited in time and/or in action. With regard to the difference between formally recognised authority – the positioning of women in church hierarchies – and informal participation, Jules-Rosette defines the frame of female power as thoroughly restricted on ritual and worship. In conclusion, "ceremonial leadership is the limited exercise of power in practical decision-making and ritual settings." (Jules-Rosette 1979: 130).

2 Vimbeni Shembe's rival was Nyathikazi Shembe (b. 1947), another son of J.G. Shembe. On the general history of the NBC, see Oosthuizen 1967; Vilakazi, Mthethwa & /Mpanza 1986 and Heuser 2003. The split after 1976 is well documented by Oosthuizen 1981.

3 Hexham 1994; Hexham & Oosthuizen 1996; 1999; 2001. The NBC-collection is the only published storage of church memory in the broad spectre of AIC so far. The whole set has been translated by H.-J. Becken.

4 See for instance the collections of the Local History Museums/Durban or of the NERMIC-Institute/University of Zululand. For the purpose of this article most important were the private archives of G.C. Oosthuizen/Durban-Westville and of H.-J. Becken/Stuttgart.

5 J.G. Shembe held a higher degree from Fort Hare, the first University for black students in Southern Africa and was a former teacher at Adam's College.

6 Interview by Hexham/Poewe with A.K. Shembe on 14 July, 1987 in Ebuhleni.

7 Ma Dainah Zama mentions the spiritual life of the church as well as the policy to buy land for the use of church members and deprived people suffering from the social and economic upheavals in 20th century South African history (in the church jargon they are called "widows and orphans").

8 The role of religion in the shaping of a Zulu ethnicity (see La Hausse 2000: 1-32 for an excellent research overview) has so far been neglected in social history. The discourse around a Zulu National Church can be traced in contemporary Zulu sources and is documented in length in Heuser 2003: chapter 6. Shembe was linked to the royal family through the marriage of his daughter to Solomon. Already before the death of Solomon (1933) he criticised himand subsequently his influence on the royal politics weakened.

9 Maré 1992: 56 with reference to the ethnic thinking mingled in the ANC and in the beginnings of M. Buthelezi's second Inkatha movement (see Maré/Hamilton 1987 and Heuser 2003: chapter 7 for the ideological links between the first Inkatha movement in the 1920's and the NBC).

10 Hexham & Oosthuizen 2001: 2; 4.

11 The main sources on Ma Mpungose are the Oosthuizen-collections and the NERMIC-Archive. Especially the Oosthuizen-file on "Ma Mpungose" contains several booklets and fragments.

12 James Fernandez (1978: 228-229) describes as the central modus of religious worldview in African religious movements in general the specific "argument of images", including ritual performance, song and dance, liturgical settings or a vast variety of colour

symbolisms. Werbner (1985) applies the notion of the "argument of images" to offer a typology of AIC in Zimbabwe.

13 Information provided by veteran NBC women's leader Ma Mthembu, Phoenix/ Inanda January 2003.

14 Oosthuizen-file: Ma Mpungose: 39-40.

15 Oosthuizen-file: Ma Mpungose: 36.

16 Werbner (1989: 316-319) describes a "central place competition" in his case-studies of AICs in Zimbabwe (cf. Werbner 1985).

17 There is no indication that Ma Dainah Zama, originating from southern KwaZulu-Natal, was involved with it, though there is an ideological link.

18 She wore Isaiah's white helmet and long trousers and added to it some items known from the female uniforms like a black umbrella and a small shield (for a genealogy of these items, see Heuser 2003: chapter 9.3.). Analysis of a video by G.C. Oosthuizen on the church of Ma Mpungose (1985; private collection G.C. Oosthuizen).

19 This rise in her activity supports the viewpoint of phenomenology: Inversive practice as in Ma Mpungose´s case is pivotal in contexts of crisis and affliction, and it strengthens an ethical statement (Sundermeier 21990: 48-49).

20 Personal communication with B. Mthembu on 27 January, 2003 in Phoenix.

21 Personal communication with G.C. Oosthuizen on 11 January, 1998 in Durban-Westville.

22 Natal Mercury, 24 September 1978.

23 The succession dispute is documented in the Zulu newspaper *Ilanga*, especially in the November/December 1996 issues.

24 Since Isaiah Shembe´s era, of course, there was always a small board of pastors, who supported the leader. With the recent NBC-history, the character of this board has changed: it seems, that it is no longer the charismatic quality of the church-leader that dominates the policy-decisions of the church. The advisory status of such boards has turned into an executive committee.

25 Interviews with Gqibokubi Henry Shembe on 24 and 25 July, 1996 in Ebuhleni. His ritual role is to open the biggest church dance festival in July. His affidavit influenced the decision at court (see below).

26 Interview with Vimbeni Shembe on 19 June, 1996 in Ebuhleni. See further: Supreme Court of South Africa, Durban and Coast Local Division, Case No. 7744/95 (here: affidavits of S.K. Khubisa; M. Mpanza; G.H. Shembe).

27 Mazibuko 1980: 42; Thomas 1999: 20. Oosthuizen estimates the number of St. John's followers somewhere in the region of 300,000. Furthermore, Sello Maboea and resource persons from the church itself contributed to the following research findings on St. John.

28 The precise year is not really known. Some records maintained 1930, others 1933 as the most probable year of foundation. The first application for official recognition dating from 1942 tentatively named 1932 from memory.

29 The argument is derived from a couple of informal interviews, Clermont (Durban), Evaton (Vereeniging), Katlehong (Germiston), Johannesburg, November 1999,

August/September 2000, September/October 2001.

30 Constitution of the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission, n. d. (1970).

31 Worship services at Clermont, November 1999, August 2000.

32 Several formal interviews, 9 August to 17 November 2000 (conducted by Oral History Project, PMB).

33 Ibid.

34 Becken 1986: 96; Drum Magazine, 14 August 1997: 18-20.

35 Worship services at Masango churches of St. John's in November 1999 and August 2000.

36 Quoted from Weekend World, 17 February, 1974.

37 Informal interviews by a group of (male) interviewees in the Kagiso township, Krugersdorp, Greater Johannesburg, 17 October 2001.

38 The AFM was formally reunited only after the end of Apartheid in 1996.

39 Drum Magazine, August 1970: 22-23.

40 Mhlongo n. d.; The World, 15 October, 1970.

41 Information received in informal interview at Katlehong, 22 September 2000.

42 Becken 1986: 95.

43 National Archives, Pretoria, SABE, BAO 7285, P 120/4/1031/3; National Archives, Pretoria, SABE, TPD, M. 2399/75; Becken 1986: 95; West 1975: 65.

44 Drum Magazine, 14 August 1997: 18-20; Daily Dispatch Online, East London, 31 December 1998.

45 National Archives, Pretoria, SABE, DGO, 176, P120/4/1031.

46 National Archives, Pretoria, SABE, DGO, 176, P120/4/1031.

47 Interview with Lydia's daughter Maureen August, Evaton, 12 October 2001.

48 The absence of women in the hierarchy of the DRC and in the academic theological world of the seminaries were due to church legislation until 1990.

49 It appeared sensible to choose the wives of ministers as interview-partners because due to their role attributed to them they usually held leading positions in the various women organisations. All interviews were conducted in the years 2000-2002.

50 Interview with female DRC-member on 14 February, 2001 in Pretoria.

51 Interview with female DRC-member on 28 February, 2001 in Stellenbosch.

52 Interview with female DRC-member on 28 February 2001 in Stellenbosch.

53 Interview with female DRC-member on 14February, 2001 in Pretoria.

54 Interview with female DRC-member on 15 February, 2001 in Pretoria.

55 Interview with female DRC-member on 28 February, 2001 in Stellenbosch.

56 Interview with Johann Kinghorn by Wolfram Weiße on 09 March, 2001 in Stellenbosch.

57 Interview with male DRC-member on 15 February, 2001 in Pretoria.

58 Interview with female DRC-member on 30 October, 2000 in Stellenbosch.

59 Interview with male DRC-member by Wolfram Weiße on 05 March, 2001 in Stellenbosch.

60 Interview with female DRC-member on 28 February, 2001 in Stellenbosch.

61 Ibid.

62 Interview with female DRC-member on 13 February, 2001 in Johannesburg.

63 Interview with male DRC-member on 30 January, 2001 in Cape Town.

64 Interview with male Uniting Reformed Church member on 19 March, 2001 in Stellenbosch.

65 Interview with female DRC-member on 13 February, 2001 in Johannesburg.

66 Interview with male DRC-member on 05 February, 2001 in Bellville.

67 Interview with female DRC-member on 28 February, 2001 in Stellenbosch..

68 Interview with female DRC-member on 15 February, 2001 in Pretoria.

69 Maré 1992: 46-47.

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