Résumé
B. Lahouel — Éthiopianisme et nationalisme africain en Afrique du Sud avant 1937.
Enfermés dans un système colonial raciste et exploiteur, lésés par l'ethnocentrisme et le comportement provocateur de certains missionnaires, les prêtres africains réagirent. Ils établirent leurs propres églises et imposèrent leurs règles aux fidèles. Cependant, leur ressentiment ne provoqua pas de changements radicaux. Ils conservèrent le message du christianisme et l'intégrèrent simplement à leur culture traditionnelle. Ils tentèrent également de faire reconnaître leurs églises par les autorités blanches qui — souvent sous la pression des missionnaires — s'y refusèrent absolument. Les craintes des Blancs n'étaient pas tout à fait dépourvues de fondement : en effet, comme les prêtres et les nationalistes noirs subissaient la même situation coloniale et étaient décidés à la combattre, certains des premiers rallièrent naturellement le camp des seconds.

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Ethiopianism and African Nationalism in South Africa before 1937

The relationship between Ethiopianism and African nationalism constituted a controversial issue. A few scholars tended to consider the former as only a reaction against missionary control. Others like Houghton engrafted political implications to this religious movement. Houghton (1911-12: 40) declared that: ‘The formation of independent Native Churches and all separatist organizations usually denoted by the term “Ethiopianism” are nothing but the self-articulated expression of a national consciousness which is in the process of birth’.

Before analysing how far Ethiopianism contributed to African nationalism, the problem of the terminology applied to African churches must be sorted out. Were they to be called ‘separatist’ or ‘independent’ bodies? A missionary in South Africa from 1937 to 1942 and a prominent historian, Bengt G. M. Sundkler (1948: 18), preferred to call them ‘Bantu Independent Churches’. George Shepperson (1963: 35), another well-known historian, rightly pointed at the illogicality of some social scientists who wrongly applied the term ‘separatist’ to African congregations which were independent creations and which had broken away from no recognized missionary body. B. A. Pauw (1960: 42) who studied the religion of the Thapingi, an African tribe inhabiting a reserve called Toung in the northern Cape, asserted that both terms ‘independent’ and ‘separatist’ were, in fact, unsuitable for they referred to European missionary churches, too. To avoid the pitfalls of a misnomer, the phrase ‘African churches’ will be generally used in this study, but the distinction between ‘independent’ and ‘separatist’ bodies will be taken into account in special cases. After a short scrutiny of the origins of the movement, we shall examine the attitude of missionaries and colonial authorities towards it as well as its impact on African nationalists.

Origins of the Movement

Since its inception, Ethiopianism conveyed Africans’ protests against all forms of racial discrimination as practised by Europeans. Some Africans resented the action of prejudiced missionaries who stripped them of their identity, undermined their institutions, and imposed an alien religion upon them. They consequently set out to establish their own churches. Yet, if the Africans were eager to feel at home by retaining their personality, they simultaneously refused to give up their Christian faith. The two broad types of African churches ‘Ethiopian’ and ‘Zionist’ both constituted emanations of African aspirations, but they did not call Christian faith into question. Ethiopian churches kept Christian liturgy while worship in Zionist bodies included traditional healing ceremonies, beating of drums and

dancing according to the rhythm of African songs. African churches, then, represented the outcome of a culture contact. This explains why Sundkler stated (as quoted by Peel 1968: 5) that they provided only 'old wine in new wineskins'.

Nehemiah Tile was the first South African to express the wish to combine Christian beliefs with the African cultural legacy. Tile was born in Tembuland. He received his formal education at Boloto and later studied theology at Healdtown, the most famous school after Lovedale. In 1880 he was ordained minister of the Wesleyan Methodist Church (Karis & Carter 1972: 157). His original ideas about religion, his desire for independence as well as his involvement in political and tribal affairs brought about clashes with his White superior, the Reverend Chubbs (Roux 1964: 77). After a quarrel with the latter, Tile left the Wesleyans and, in 1884, set up a 'Tembu National Church' with the support of Ngangilizwe, the Tembu paramount chief. But, as a result of the Cape government pressure on him, Ngangilizwe ceased to help the church, which lost its initial impetus, but nevertheless survived after Tile's death in 1885 (Karis & Carter 1972: 157).

Some Africans rebelled against the colour bar within White churches. Indeed, although European missionaries preached equality between human races, in practice they adopted a paternalistic attitude towards their African converts, looked upon them as children unable to take the reins of their destiny, refused to ordain them as priests or, if they did so, always appointed them to inferior positions which compelled them to obey their White masters, and therefore deprived them of any initiative (Roux 1964: 77-78).

Racial segregation led to schism between Mangena M. Mokone (1851-1936) and the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Mokone was born at Bogkaka, in the Transvaal. Baptized a Christian in 1874, he started studying theology at Pietermaritzburg a year later. In 1880 the Wesleyan Methodist Church appointed him to Natal, and two years later to Pretoria (Karis & Carter 1972: 93). A zealous preacher, he was entrusted with the supervision of several churches, but his long career and his hard work were finally overlooked, and a young White missionary was preferred to him (Leenhardt 1976: 21). He thenceforward disliked European control and craved for independence. He resigned from the Wesleyan Methodist Church in 1892 and launched an 'Ethiopian Church' (Sundkler 1948: 39). His feelings towards European missionaries are clearly conveyed in a manifesto he wrote with some of his colleagues: Xaba, Gabashane and Kumalo. In that text which was read at a conference held in Pretoria in April 1899, they stressed the discrepancy between the missionaries' teachings and their attitude towards African churches. The missionaries taught their African converts to be more responsible, Mokone and his friends pointed out, and therefore, their present opposition to African churches which constituted but the outcome of their teaching seemed paradoxical. They also expressed their eagerness to get rid of the missionaries who belonged to another race, thought differently and knew nothing about the people they had to deal with (Leenhardt 1976: 86-87).

Lucas Thomas Madhleni Zungu, from Weenen in Natal, also opposed racial discrimination in missionary bodies. Baptized in 1866 by the Christian Apostolic Church in Zion, he left it to set up the 'African Christian Baptist Church of South Africa' on 27 September 1907, because the Reverend Daniel Bryant, under the influence of the Reverend Le Roux, refused to nominate African ministers or evangelists.

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1. Sundkler (1976: 5) pointed out that Zionist churches had nothing to do with Jewish Zionism. Peel (1968: 153) asserted that their members nevertheless compared themselves with the Jews who, despite their oppression, remained virtuous.

The neglect of Africans by European ministers brought about other withdrawals from the latter's churches. For instance, Matthews Nagato said that he first belonged to the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) at Elim in Pretoria, which ran European as well as African religious bodies. However, the DRC tended to disregard the latter. As a result, he parted with it to join the 'Church of God and Saints of Christ' founded before 1914 by Prosper William S. Crowdy, an Afro-American.3

Economic and political pressures also contributed to the emergence of Ethiopianism and strengthened it. The movement initiated by Enoch Josiah Mgijima in the 1920s should be seen in that light. Mgijima was born in the Kamastone Location, where the bulk of African inhabitants suffered from the decline of agricultural production due to the scarcity of land and to soil erosion. A series of natural disasters further hit African farmers. Around World War I, they also had to cope with new economic difficulties created by wartime inflation, higher taxes and by the drought of 1919. The South African government simultaneously deprived them of any hope of alleviating their hardships. The 1913 Natives' Land Act denied to Africans the right to mitigate land shortages by buying plots in White areas. The South African Native National Congress (SANNC) representatives, who had already informed the Native Land Commission about the African farmers' plight in 1914, pressed again in vain for a redress of their socio-economic and political grievances in 1919 (Edgar 1982). These difficulties led an increasing number of Africans to call into question Christian principles of equality and justice and to endorse Mgijima's religious conceptions.

The 'prophet' Mgijima was dismissed by the 'Church of God and Saints of Christ' because his visions threatened social order. He claimed to have seen a stone rolling down a mountain side and sweeping away those at the foot as well as a baboon which, in the end, benefited from the damage caused by two fighting white goats. The 'Israelites', as Mgijima's followers called themselves, believed that these visions foreshadowed the White people's downfall. They also apparently thought that these were too weak after the Great War to defeat a wholesale resistance.4 Although some contemporary newspapers condemned the Israelites' defying attitude towards the local authorities, they nevertheless stressed the link between the former's awful conditions and their reactions and urged the latter to improve their situation to avoid further violent outbursts. For example, The South African Outlook stated: 'It is the duty of the more advanced and governing race not only to put down sedition but to deal wisely with the politically unhealthy conditions in which sedition finds its seedbed'.5

Missionaries' Reactions

Some missionaries viewed African churches with hostility mainly because they deprived European-led congregations of part of their membership and, thereby, undermined their influence. For example, James Mata Dwane (1848-1916), who had been an evangelist of the Wesleyan mission in 1875 and then minister of the same religious body in 1881, became aware of racial segregation. By 1894-95 he decided to rely on himself and started his own church. In 1908, his 'Church of Ethiopia' gathered some 3,500 members (Sundkler 1948: 41-42).

3. Ibid., file no. 31.
5. The South African Outlook (Rondebosch) 2 Jan. 1922.
The development of African churches led missionaries to dread the eventual setting up of an African National Church which would hinder the evangelization of African people and oust the White men from the country (ibid.: 13). Indeed, some African-controlled churches spread and had branches throughout South Africa. It was the case of the ‘Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion’, founded in 1904 by Samuel James Brander after he had broken away from the Church of England. According to David Phola from Springs Location, the Ethiopian Catholic Church in Zion had congregations in various places such as Boksburg, Pietersburg, Bloemfontein, Johannesburg, Vereeniging and Springs. These congregations were respectively headed by P. O. Brander, the Reverend Dhane, Stephen Ngoato, P. Sidbwaba, Cornelius Aaron and David Phola.

However, the danger of a powerful African National Church looming over the head of Europeans seems exaggerated. Indeed, African churches were generally too small to really jeopardize the law of the land. Dr Max Buchler, who had been a prison chaplain for Africans in Pretoria for twenty years, depicted the competition between church leaders and their lack of unity as follows:

‘Some of these leaders might have had a certain training in church leadership, but the great majority has no training whatsoever as they emerge from the rank and file of uneducated men. This explains the continual changes, separations, and reseparations among them. There is a certain real hunger for leadership training among them, but at the same time a certain suspicion against anything organized by churches, even on an undenominational basis. They are afraid of being absorbed by another greater body, and reluctant to join in any venture which they feel might reduce their identity’.

Some missionaries, who resented the African clergymen’s newly-acquired independence, tried to present Ethiopianism as a subversive movement. They blamed its leaders’ lack of education, and denounced it as a possible source of unrest. In trying to counter their attacks in an article which appeared in The Christian Express, Xaba, a prominent representative of Mokone’s Ethiopian Church, admitted this shortcoming, but he pointed out that White missionaries suffered from it, too. He wrote:

‘We greatly appreciate a sound education, and we badly need men who have received it; but a mason builds up his foundations with all kinds of stones [...] I know several churches of which certain pastors did not get a special training to perform their tasks. They were shepherds, gardeners, warehousemen, policemen, farmers and wagon-drivers. All this existed before the Ethiopian church was set up’ (Leenhardt 1976: 38).

To deter the development of the Ethiopian movement, some missionaries also tried to stain the reputation of their African competitors, but their views were not always shared. In 1901-1902, the American Zulu Mission reported more favourably on African churches. It asserted that ‘in the most important point, moral purity, while there are many individual back-slidings, there is encouragingly little lowering of the standards or careless laxity on the part of the churches’.

Depreciating the African clergymen’s independence and wishing them to remain within their fold, White missionaries created judicial worries to them, too. For

6. South African Native Churches..., op. cit., file no. 34.
7. The Methodist Apr. 8, 1907.
instance, some Zulu church leaders who received circulars from the Foreign Mission Board in the United States urging them to support themselves believed that self-support meant self-government. By the end of 1897 African preachers at both Table Mountain and Johannesburg split from the mission, taking away half of its membership. At Lower Umzimkulu, they set up a 'Zulu Congregational Church' under the leadership of the Reverend Simungu Bafazini Shibe. To wreck Shibe's authority, the American Zulu Mission charged him with preaching to his followers that 'it was quite time they shook off the power of the White man and controlled their own affairs', an accusation which was likely to stir up colonial administrators' discontent.⁹

**African Churches and Colonial Authorities**

Many African churches did not challenge colonial rule. On the contrary, they sought government recognition. In February 1897 Dwane Mokone and Joseph Napo Kanyane, who had left the Anglican church in Pretoria and established an 'African Church' in 1888-89, applied to the Transvaal government for the acknowledgement of the Ethiopian Church, which was granted.¹⁰ Dwane's speech on 5 December 1897, during the inauguration of the Church of St. Pierre, again revealed his law-abiding attitude towards colonial authorities. He declared that 'the African Methodist Episcopal Church [. . .] teaches the most sacred duties to its members notably that every soul is subject to a higher power. For there is no power but from God and the authorities are established by God' (Leenhardt 1976: 43).

African clergymen followed suit. P. J. Mzimba, a Fingo who had split from the United Church of Scotland in 1898 and set up his 'Presbyterian Church of Africa' with a recorded membership of 6,500 communicants and 20,000 adherents, also approached the government to be acknowledged. However, like several other secessionists, Mzimba was seen as a rabble-rouser and was consequently refused a licence.¹¹

Likewise, several years after its foundation in 1897, the 'African Gaza Church' in Pretoria addressed a petition dated 28 December 1914, calling for the government's approval. But, alarmed by the growing number of African churches, the Union government turned down its request. As Buxton, the Governor General and High Commissioner of South Africa, put it:

'It has not been the practice of the government hitherto to accord recognition to the Native Separatist Churches of which there is today a very large number including many which cannot be regarded as other than mere mushroom growths'.¹²

Some missionaries' opinion about that church weighed a great deal upon the colonial administrators' decision. Indeed, the ministers who forwarded the Gaza Church petition disapproved of the new body's doctrine and behaviour. In their

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minute no. 228 of 2 March 1915, they argued that a church should get assent from the religious world before asking for State recognition.  

Isaiah Shembe, the founder of the 'Nazareth Baptist Church' about 1903, adopted the same collaborating attitude. He strongly deprecated anti-White and anti-government activities, and dismissed from his church all the people who spoke against Europeans. For Shembe, the Whites had brought the word of God, and to fight against them was to stand against God. In the 1920s Shembe explained to some Nazarites who had joined the Industrial and Commercial Workers' Union (ICU) that it opposed the government, the missionaries and the Whites in general, and on his advice, they returned their membership cards (Becken 1965: 3-4).

In this context, it would be interesting to analyse African politicians’ attitude towards Ethiopianism.

**Impact of Ethiopianism on African Politicians**

The African nationalists' attitude towards Ethiopianism varied. Some were closely related to the movement. Charlotte Makgomo Manye, later Mrs Marshall Maxeke and President of the women's section of the SANN - the Bantu Women's League—heard that Mokone had started his own church while she was studying in the United States. She wrote to him, suggesting he should get in touch with the American Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and seek affiliation with that body.

The Reverend Henry Reed Ncgayiya, who contributed to launch the Ethiopian Church of South Africa in March 1909, became its President and had E. J. Mqoboli as his assistant. They were both outstanding leaders of the SANN. The Table in Appendix reveals that their church had branches all over Southern Africa.

Abner S. Mtimkulu, another prominent member of the SANN, also joined the movement. Ordained a minister in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, he broke away from it to become President of the 'Independent Bantu Methodist Church' (Karis & Carter 1972: 106).

However, some other African spokesmen such as Saul Msane, S. T. Plaatje and J. L. Dube held the movement at arms' length. They showed a rather lukewarm interest in the activities of Joseph Booth, a British missionary who, according to Shepperson (1953: 13), 'kept the pot of Ethiopianism boiling in South Africa'. This was also the case of Henry Selby Msimang. Although his father Joel Msimang set up an 'Independent Methodist Church of South Africa', at no moment in his Autobiography did H. S. Msimang deal with his eventual involvement in the Ethiopian movement. His talk about the foundation of the Ethiopian Church further betrayed his ignorance in that field.

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It would appear throughout this short study that Ethiopianism was, above all, a religious movement. Disillusioned by the wide gulf between the Christian principles of equality and justice and the hard reality of the colour bar within European-led churches and in the South African society at large, Africans made up their mind to set up their own churches.

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15. South African Native Churches..., op. cit., file no. 36.
It is nevertheless suggested that as they were struggling, in fact, against forms of colonial rule, some of them became naturally involved in the African nationalist movement. As time went by, a dialectical relationship between nationalism and Ethiopianism gradually appeared. If some African clergymen became engaged in political activities, nationalist feelings were also at the origin of some African churches' growth. The Reverend F. H. Burke (1967) who served as a missionary of the Assemblies of God in Southern Africa since 1921 noted later: 'Today, partly as an outcome of the upsurge of nationalism in Africa, the number of churches has multiplied'.

*Université d’Oran, 1986.*

**APPENDIX**

**BRANCHES OF THE ETIOPIAN CHURCH OF SOUTH AFRICA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Place</th>
<th>Person in Charge</th>
<th>Membership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>Reverend Stephen Dhlamini</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germiston</td>
<td>Rev. John Mrwebi</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boksburg</td>
<td></td>
<td>120</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benoni</td>
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<td>Springs</td>
<td>Rev. Michael Caluza</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leslie</td>
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<td>Bethal</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>Lydenburg</td>
<td>Rev. John Mzama</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belfast</td>
<td>Evangelist Johannes Ngema</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pretoria</td>
<td>Rev. Richard Matsepe</td>
<td>200</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bon Accord</td>
<td>Rev. Jacob Israel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middleburg</td>
<td>Evan. Isaac Msendani</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standertonfontein</td>
<td>Rev. Frans Mrwebi</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Voskruist</td>
<td>Evan. Matthew Mbata</td>
<td>—</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wackerstroom</td>
<td>Rev. John Mnisi</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schweizer-Reneke</td>
<td>Evan. Albert Jantjes</td>
<td>160</td>
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<td>Witbank</td>
<td>Evan. Johnson Nzozi</td>
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<td>Bloemfontein</td>
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<td>Ermelo</td>
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<td>Machadodorp</td>
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<td>Morgenzou</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warmbaths</td>
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