

HOLINESS AND TABOO IN THE ZION CHRISTIAN CHURCH

S Moripe¹

1. INTRODUCTION

Taboo is a Polynesian word, which literally means something marked out as forbidden. The concept of taboo is closely linked with the concept mana.² Mana is a mysterious kind of supernatural power, a potential energy which people believe to be in and behind all men/women and things. This mana makes a thing, a human being or an animal that which they are. Everything can have mana, but if a thing is big or strong, or when a man/woman has exceptional talents and when something or someone is powerful or dangerous, then it is believed that it or he/she has much mana. Mana is like an electric charge.

Mana can also be dangerous. This property of danger leads to the concept of taboo. A person or object that for some or other reason is taboo must not be touched. Foodstuffs that are taboo must not be eaten. Animals that are taboo must not be mentioned by their names or be eaten. On certain days it is taboo to work or to eat or drink or have sexual intercourse. Anything that has to do with death or the dead is often taboo. Priest, kings and chieftains may often not be called by their proper names, or be touched, or spoken to by ordinary people because of their being charged with mana.

In the Bible 'holiness' is related to the world of nature and of history, to the realm of human experience and conduct, to the election-covenant life of Israel, to the psycho-physical life of the

1 Dr S Moripe, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, University of the North, Private Bag X1106, Sovenga, 0727.

2 This is a Melanesian word introduced into history of religion by the missionary Codrington in a letter to the famous scientist of religion, Dr Max Müller, in 1877.

individual, and even to the destiny of nations. There, it is revelation of the holy presence which gives rise to the impulse to worship: where the Holy One manifests himself in the hieros logos as the theophanies, altars and sanctuaries are erected to bring the event and word to holy immediacy and realization. Wherever, God's presence is felt, there men/women encounter the wonder and mystery of holiness (Buttrick 1962: 616).

The African world is one of participation between what Western philosophers consider as two distinct and partly separated worlds. The world which falls under our senses is not merely a shadow of the sacred transcendental world as it would for Plato. On the other hand the divine is not a dimension which is arrived at by rational abstractions from the empirical. It is experienced in the empirical: both are equally directly perceived and equally concrete (Omi and Anyanwu: 1984: 121). Kwame Nkrumah (1964: 12) expresses this point as follows: In many African societies, the dialectical contradiction between 'inside' and 'outside' (world) was reduced by making the visible world continuous with the invisible world. For them heaven was not outside the world, but inside it.

In the African Zionist case, the prescriptions and taboos of everyday life are part of the order of meaningful actions which seek to intervene in the contradictory relationship between local people and the larger system that contains them. As in many reformist movements, dietary prescriptions are important signifiers of the reconstructed life in Zion.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE ZCC

Ignatius Lekganyane, better known as Engenas, was the founder of the Zion Christian Church in 1924. Today members of this church are either found as followers of the Zion Christian Church, with the star as their emblem, or the Saint Engenas Zion Christian Church, with the dove as their emblem.

This church split into two after the death of Engenas in 1948. One group was led by Edward Lekganyane (the Zion Christian Church), while the other group was led by Joseph Lekganyane (the Saint Engenas Zion Christian Church), both legitimate sons of

Engenas (Lukhaimane 1980: 1). The current leaders of these churches are Barnabas, the son of Edward, and Ignatius, the son of Joseph. Like kings and chiefs, leadership in these churches is hereditary. The strong and powerful one is the Zion Christian Church, better known as the ZCC.

The beginnings of the ZCC have some direct links with J A Dowie's church, namely with the Christian Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion in the United States of America, and with William Seymour, a black preacher in the black church in Azusa Street, Los Angeles, where the emphasis on "Baptism in the Holy Spirit" (evidenced, initially, by the speaking in tongues) was propagated (Denis 1995: 103).

The root of the ZCC is the Pentecostal Movement which originated at the turn of the 19th century. There is, however, a definite historical and theological link between the Pentecostal Movement and the African Zionist Movement. Yes, there is a vast difference between these two movements but the common historical and theological roots need to be recognised.

3. HOLINESS AND TABOO IN THE ZCC

The prescriptions and taboos experienced in the ZCC, stem from Dowie's church, and through him, from Leviticus. Baptized members eat no pork and no animals that have died of natural causes. They also do not smoke, drink alcohol or (in theory) consult doctors, either native or Western (Comaroff 1985: 206 & 217). A dead body cannot be taken into a church building. Modesty in dress is required of women. The head must be kept covered. Contraception is also prohibited.

Engenas Lekganyane has discarded the white long clothes, growing of long beards and no more taking off of shoes which was required when entering the place of worship, which is the main feature of the Zionists in South Africa. The most basic serious prohibition Engenas introduced was witchcraft, sorcery and fetichism. It is at this point that the main breakthrough of the church, by the substitution of prayer and faith and its associated practices, has occurred. Almost all the members of the church are

satisfied and relieved to find a new way of worship and they are confident of this virtue.

On 28 December 1951, Bishop Edward Lekganyane held a meeting with Council of ZCC ministers for the very first time since his holy enthronement. In reiterating the church laws that had earlier been declared by his father who had passed away on 1 June 1948. Bishop Edward's opening pronouncement was that: "If a preacher, deacon or minister smokes or drinks, his certificate should be confiscated and he should cease his duties as an ordained leader forthwith" (Motolla 1992: 8).

Motolla (1987: 21) says alcohol is considered a drug medically and it was long prescribed as a tonic and sedative. He further says: "I look upon every member of the ZCC as an overseer and not tarry long in wine, and to be blameless". Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane regarded tobacco as poison in April 1984. He cited Dr. M Orfilla, the president of the Medical Academy of Paris, as saying "Tobacco is the most subtle poison known to chemists except the daily prussic acid". Later in 1984, the Bishop was invited by the Executive Committee of Atteridgeville/Saulsville Society for the Care of the Aged, and his topic was "The danger of alcoholism and tobacco".

Herewith an interesting incident which occurred at Tsono Mission in Transkei. It was the first time Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane visited this place officially in 1987 to unveil a tombstone. According to the tradition of the church, the green and yellow uniform may only be worn when attending church and prayer meetings for the women but definitely not to the graveyard. The Bishop, dressed in green and yellow, led the congregation, resplendent in their green and yellow — brass band and all — to the cemetery to dedicate a tombstone. At the gate leading into the cemetery, the congregation wavered, unsure what to do, whether to enter or not to enter. Knowing the tradition which governs the green and yellow uniform, the congregation skirted the gate, and assembled outside the cemetery fence, doubting the truth that their eyes were conveying to them that the Bishop had entered the cemetery in the green and yellow. When the Bishop indicated that they should enter the cemetery, they readily did so but with a

thousand questions in their minds begging for an answer (Motolla 1987: 15).

The clothing and presentation of the body are crucial dimensions of the Zionist scheme. Uniforms have assumed an important role in all South African churches from the start. The ZCC uniform, while sharing the underlying symbolic scheme of the Zionist as a whole, shows several distinctive variations. Its uniform tends not to be worn outside the context of ritual performance. However, the icon of the spiritual power of the church is a metal badge which is always pinned to the clothing of members during working hours, prominently displaying the stamp of the church over any other apparel. The badge is a silver star on which the letters ZCC are inscribed, and it is attached to a contrasting strip of black cloth. It is sometimes referred to as "the star of Lekganyane". Sometimes it is placed next to afflicted bodily parts to effect healing. Although, the ZCC dress, particularly of the women, makes little use of white, the men wear conspicuous white boots, an important emblem of the church.

Ministers of the ZCC have strict rules of purification, for example, they are not allowed to pray for a sick person if they have attended a funeral. They have to abstain for seven days, before they could perform their duties again. A minister is not supposed to eat food prepared by, or live with a woman who has just given birth. The implication for this practice was that most of the ministers became polygamists, for this would enable them to stay with another wife while serving the church. (These restrictions are based on the book of Leviticus 12: 1-5)

4. THE HEADQUARTERS OF THE ZCC

The headquarters of the ZCC nestle on the Wolkberg range, midway between Pietersburg city and the spectacular mountain splendour of Magoebaskloof, and about 10 kilometers from the University of the North. It is located at a place called Boyne in Moria (Zion City). It is a re-establishment of the "original" Holy place that had been eclipsed by the state capital (Pretoria) and economic centre (Johannesburg). Moria is a graphic icon of the appropriation of the material and spiritual cargo of the neo-colonial system (Comaroff

1985: 239-240). The choice of the name is itself significant: Moria is a Biblical name for Jerusalem (2 Cronicles 3: 1), the place where the temple was built. This was an appropriation by the theocratic state of the name of the 'original' cult centre at mount Moria, somewhat to the north (Gen. 12: 6; 22: 2).

Moria is the new Jerusalem of the Zionist, where holidays, feasts and conferences are held. The ZCC makes more use of the Biblical lexicon than do many smaller Zionists groups. The universalising properties of these symbols serve to unify micro-historical and cultural variation (Comaroff 1985: 247).

Its adherents called it the city of love and peace, like the Psalmist (122: 6) who say "pray for peace of Jerusalem: ...may there be peace inside your walls and safety in your place". Initially it was Maclean farm which Bishop Engenas Lekganyane bought in 1913 (Motolla 1990: 31), in the area of Kgosi Mamabolo. In this city, there is a mountain called Thabakgone. It is also were Engenas and Edward Lekganyane are buried. This mountain is normally called 'Mount Zion'. In many traditional religions of Africa, mountains or hills are regarded with awe and this is reflected in a number of Afro-Christian religions utilising hills and mountains for special devotions and above all, for great pilgrimages or festivals (Turner 1967b: 62; Baëta 1962: 94; Sundkler 1961: 198; Parrinder 1953: 124).

5. CONCLUSION

All religions prescribe taboos. In the Old Testament, the idea of impurity which led to a number of laws about unclean animals and forbidden sexual relations is largely to be considered a taboo concept. Holy places are also taboo, such as graveyards, shrines, trees, groves or mountains where spirits or gods are believed to have taken their abode. Taboo is a basic element of the religious experience and attitude of man/woman. It originates from an instinctive fear of, or awe towards the mysterious 'other' world and its powers by which men/women feel themselves surrounded. This 'other' world is sacred or holy. The attitude which springs from taboo is one of being careful, it puts men/women on the guard (Bolink 1981: 12-18).

The membership of the ZCC is overwhelmingly African. This church as a multi-ethnic movement, has spread over a large part of Southern Africa, although it only gained official state recognition in September 1992 (Naudé 1995: 78). This church faces the future in full confidence in the Lord and is ready and willing to increasingly fulfil its calling in this part of the world.

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