Prophets never die? The Story of Bishop P.J. Masango of the St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission

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Abstract

Bishop Petros Masango rose to prominence at St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission and eventually became a leader of one of the splinter groups that resulted from the split that occurred after a long drawn out court battle with the founder Ma Christinah Nku. This article is an exploration of his life and teachings through the lenses of his official biographer Rev. JB Mhlongo. We explore his childhood, marriage, conversion, calling, ministry and prophecy. Mhlongo, in the title of the biography calls him the famous prophet. The theme of the spirit and its influence runs through his narrative. The story of Masango represents the failure of African Christianity to break away from the dominant western Christian paradigm when it comes to the subordination of women and according them equal status.

Keywords: St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission, Bishop Petros Masango, Ma Christinah Nku, prophet, South Africa, biography

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Introduction

St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission belongs to the African Indigenous Church category. The church has had a protracted history of conflict and schisms. At the core of the conflict and schisms were contestations over leadership and control of the church and its resources. One of the major distinguishing features of this church is that it was founded by a woman, Ma Christinah Nku in 1939 at Evaton outside Johannesburg. In the words of anthropologist and theologian Linda Thomas,

> Acting upon a vision she believed came from God, Mother Nku launched her own church, which drew upon precolonial African religious practices and imported Christianity (1999:20).

Thus making this church both African and Christian (Masondo 2001). Consistent with the politics of gender in the AICs in the 1960s and 1970s, the source of the major schism in 1971 was the non-recognition of a woman's leadership. The church constitution had a provision for an Archbishop and head of the church which was the 'senior male position of the church' (West 1975:65). Ma Nku had by-passed this provision through the appointment of her husband Lazarus Nku. The situation changed when Mr Nku died in a train accident in 1967. As long as her husband or appointee was archbishop, Ma Nku had all the power and authority. However, the situation changed with the election of PJ Masango who 'was not prepared to play second fiddle' (West 1975:67). Ma Nku then appealed to her spiritual authority but was challenged in court by Masango using the constitution of the church. The Pretoria High Court found in favour of Masango in 1971.

Mhlongo's interpretation of the church split lays a lot of the blame at the feet of Johannes Nku. He acknowledges that Ma Nku was a gifted woman who received revelations from God about the founding of the church. She even had the vision of a church building with 12 doors which was built in Evaton. On the occasion of the official opening of the building Masango had a prophecy or vision. In this prophecy he saw the building standing empty, grass growing in it and a bird flying in and out. This, he says, was not well received by those who were in attendance. Bishop Johannes Nku was said not to have been a member in good standing in the church and was not fit to be Archbishop. Bishop Masango was one of the people who voiced that opinion

and then trouble started which ended up in court. During court proceedings, it is claimed, the Holy Spirit instructed Masango to observe the gown that was worn by the trial court judge. After the trial he was told to make a gown similar to that and wear it. The gown symbolized triumph.

Mrs Christinah Nku (fondly referred to as Mme Christinah or Ma Nku), … was born to farm labourers in the Viljoensdrift district, Helbron, and baptized in the NG Sendingkerk, troubled by ill-health and experienced visions. In her constant search for health she joined the Apostolic Faith Mission and was in contact with other Zionist leaders who had been part of the original Dowie - Le Roux congregation in the 1920s (Kruss 1985: 165).

Healing is one of the major attractions of AICs. Rev JB Mhlongo, the official biographer of Bishop Masango pointed out that St. Johns was a church for those who are ill and no one goes there willingly but through a special calling. Healing, through the use of holy water, was central to the theology and practice of the church. St. John's had become a national church and had branches in both Lesotho and Swaziland before the split in 1970, which left it divided into two factions, one led by Mrs Nku in Evaton and the other led by Bishop Petros Masango in Germiston. The source of the conflict was a leadership dispute, which ended up in the Pretoria Supreme Court, which confirmed Bishop Masango as the leader of the church. Even though the Masango faction won the case in court, they still regarded Ma Nku as their spiritual mother. Ma Nku features prominently in their prayers, sermons, and narrations of their history. She is also credited for healing and guiding Masango to become the leader that he was. According to social anthropologist Martin West, Ma Nku confirmed that 'I have saved his life, ordained and anointed him, and made him what he is today directed by the Holy Spirit' (1975:66).

Prophets, like the ancestors, are seen as mediators between the people and God. Paul Makhubu (1988:59) noted that,

> The custom of not approaching the king or any senior person directly, creates the mental attitude with which an African would approach God. No ordinary man could talk to a king face-to-face. This was considered to be extremely disrespectful, and carried a heavy fine, or the death penalty, depending on circumstances. In the same way God cannot be directly approached; someone must act as a go-between.

The designation of prophet includes both the biblical prophets as well as those who were responsible for the founding and growth of St. John's. In the popular narrative of St. John's there is an acknowledgement of other prophets who came before the advent of the church and prophesied about it and its future role. For St. John's, a prophet is someone who is a seer, healer, and a spiritual parent. Theologian P. O. Abioje (2010:790) defined the prophet as 'someone who speaks divine words and engages in divine actions (such as protest activities against injustice) that can save or liberate people from oppressive and exploitative situations, and from ignorance'. Prophets are 'gifted' people with a message that would help to transform people's lives. Mhlongo articulates this point very well with the claim that Masango went to heaven where he met with three Roman Catholic bishops who showed him the suffering of the people. He was shown naked, needy weak, sick and struggling people in general. The prophet is meant to alleviate the suffering of the people and give them direction for their future. However, prophets are not the final authority but mere conduits for the message of God. Talking about God this way characterises Him to be the God of history. He is not only historical but He was active in history, shaping St. John's to be what it is today through messages and revelations given to His prophets at different times in history. Mhlongo was at pains throughout his book to say that all the revelations to the prophet (Masango) have come to pass. Because of all this evidence of reliability, people can trust his God. Mhlongo used scriptural references (Acts 12: 7-10; Peter) to indicate that this man belonged to a special class of prophets and anointed people.

The Prophet Masango (1906-1984)

Geoffrey Nelson (1987: 121), echoing Max Weber's words, pointed out that prophets claim that their authority is derived directly from God. Bishop Barnabas Lekganyane of the ZCC demonstrated this attitude when he refused to be questioned by the Truth and Reconciliation during his church's submission. All questions were answered by his aides (Petersen 1999). The claim on its own is not enough as it has to be legitimated through an extraordinary narrative deeming the individual in question a special person or an anointed one. There has to be something extra-ordinary that sets this person apart from ordinary members of society. Such narratives create a

mystique around the person thus confirming that s/he has a special calling to serve people. Furthermore, the individual in question is said to be endowed with 'supernatural, superhuman or exceptional powers' (Dow 1969: 306). The prophet is able to operate outside the realm of everyday routine. His/her powers are able to defy rationality and logic. Partly, this is the attraction of this figure among the oppressed because they offer a radical solution to their problems without relying on the provisions of traditional logic. Moreover, 'by accepting or believing in the leader's extraordinary qualities, the followers legitimize his claim to their obedience' (Dow 1969: 307). The narratives are then edged into the history and tradition of the group. This is also true of church founders like Isaiah Shembe and Engenas Lekganyane. During my fieldwork in a St. John's congregation in Crossroads, Cape Town, I met an assistant pastor who claimed to have been in the company of Bishop Masango in Johannesburg. He related a number of stories about the miracles that he experienced while in his company. One of those stories was that there was a big service at Jabulani (Soweto) where Masango was officiating. It was a beautiful day and one could not spot a cloud in the sky. At about 12 noon, Masango dismissed the congregation and told them to rush home as a huge storm was coming. Immediately after that pronouncement, clouds started gathering and later heavy rain fell. This and many other stories are told by individual members to show that Masango was a unique, gifted and special person.

Mhlongo reported that Masango was born on a farm at Wakkerstroom in province of Mpumalanga on January 1, 1906. He was the second son of six boys and four girls. His parents lived on a white owned farm. The fact that he was a special person was noticed and confirmed before he was born. For anyone to make claims about prophecy, leadership or position of authority there had to be a mysterious event before they were born. While his mother was pregnant with him she saw a rainbow in the well where she fetched water. The amazing thing about her sighting of the rainbow is that it appeared when she was close to the well and when she moved away it disappeared. When she reported the matter to other people, including white owners of the farm where they stayed, she was told that she was going to give birth to someone great. After his birth he was named Ndumbela. In the Shembe narrative, Isaiah Shembe's mother is said to have swallowed a flower before he was conceived indicating that an extraordinary individual would be born. For the followers, insertions of such events in the

narrative serve to legitimize claims made by the leader.

In the childhood narrative Masango is portrayed as a special child who was constantly surrounded by the miraculous or mysterious. First, in the community there were games where all children participated. Masango used to run faster than older boys. During the race two angels appeared one on each side and carried him to run faster than other boys. Second, when playing with other boys making clay oxen, his oxen always won over others something reminiscent of the Biblical story of Moses and his snake eating up all others. Third, he was a lucky charm for his mother during the cultivating season. He was given seeds to plant and those produced higher yields. His mother even asked him to place eggs in nests of incubating hens and in his case all eggs would be hatched and produce chicks. Masango's miracles were not only evident to Black people but to white people in the area as well.

African thought conceives marriage, first and foremost, as a heterosexual union whose fundamental aim is to build a family through having children. Through this institution both men and women get onto the next level to attain full humanity. In fact marriage, 'is the acceptable social structure for transmitting life, the life that preserves the vital force of humans, families and clans' (Magesa 1998:115). Catholic theologian Laurenti Magesa (1998:116) further asserted that,

> African marriage is ultimately anchored in God, the main sustainer of life, and the principal preserver and transmitter of the vital force. For this reason, much of what takes place in marriage has overtly religious characteristics and significance.

Furthermore, he described marriage as an alliance between two families thus AmaZulu call the initial processes *ukwakha isihlobo esihle* (to build good kinship).

Mhlongo claims that Masango had a vision of a woman that he was going to marry a few years before he left Wakkerstroom for Johannesburg. He had a vision of a MoSotho woman. In the vision he was told that she was in Johannesburg. When he eventually got to Johannesburg he met the woman in the vision and they got married in 1937 and had seven children. It was during this time that he got extremely ill. Mhlongo does not give any details about the circumstances of their meeting as well as their wedding. He only says that the woman's name was Seipati Annah Morotsi. She became a very

powerful figure in the church ministering alongside her husband. She is one of a few women whose names are mentioned among the prophets of the church. In the popular church narrative she is revered and affectionately referred to as Mme Annah.

Mhlongo claims that as a result of his illness Masango died and ascended to heaven. During his ascent to heaven he saw three heavens and the 7th heaven where prophets are initiated (*bethwasiswa*), and that is where he was also initiated. The fact that he underwent his initiation in heaven sets him apart from other prophets who were initiated by other prophets. While in heaven he was approached by three Roman Catholic Bishops who showed him the suffering of people on earth due to disease, ignorance and poverty. He was then instructed to return to earth in order to deliver nations in bondage. The bishops anointed him with oil and then gave him new names Petros John (after Apostles Peter and John), instead of Ndumbela. It is said that Masango testified that he felt the oil penetrating his brain and bones. His power was going to be double as embodied it both Peter and John. After his return from heaven, he had seized to be Ndumbela but he was an embodiment of Apostles Peter and John. The spirits that operated as Peter and John in the New Testament live across ages and get embodied in different bodies in different eras. Among his followers he is also affectionately referred to as the 'double engine' because of this anointing. The bishops blessed him and told him that whatever he touches will be blessed. On the third day he gained his consciousness. A word came to him saying that he must have the baptism of John at a river. He told his superiors at the American Board Organization Church but they rejected his plea. Masango, who was brought up in the American Board Church, could not find any joy in the church. He tried to explain his visions to church authorities but they either ignored him or found him irritating. In fact, '*kwahamba kwahamba basebembiza ngohlanya ngoba wayekhuluma izinto abangaziqondi* (as time went on they started calling him a mad man because they had no insight on the mysteries he was sharing)' (Mhlongo 6). As time went on leaders in his church became impatient with him. They even called him a mad man. His sister by this time was aware of the existence of Ma Nku, she encouraged his brother to go and see her at Evaton.

Masango's illness is nothing uncommon to people with an ancestral calling. Some are inflicted with illnesses that no one can detect and only become better after the acceptance of the ancestral call. Masango was ill and

had exhausted various avenues to arrest the situation but to no avail. He only got his healing after visiting and joining Ma Nku's church.

The Coming of the Prophet is Foretold

The dominant Christian view is that the coming of Jesus was foretold by Isaiah and other prophets hundreds of years before. Each of the prophets gives a description of a messianic figure who will save people from oppression. The figure of the prophet is someone who is a liberator or emancipator. Because of the magnitude of Masango's gift and the work he was to carry out, his coming had to be foretold like that of Jesus. It had to be announced by renowned prophets. Mhlongo reported that the coming was foretold by Walter Matita who was the founder of the church of Moshoeshe in Lesotho and Ma Nku.

Historian Marie-Louise Martin (1964) recorded that Prophet Walter Matita (1885-1935) was born with a complete set of teeth. They were lost and he found them when died and went to heaven at age 25. On his way to heaven he went through a number of worlds. Haliburton reported that:

> The pleasure loving Mattita was called from 'the quicksands of sins'. He died and went to 'where the heaven of the stars meets a higher heaven' and was questioned by seven men. He was quickly sliding towards Satan - as he tried to block his way at every opportunity. After his release from the clutches of Satan he was taken up. 'Here a court was assembled, the King on a higher throne, twenty four elders wearing golden crowns around him, four strange creatures each with four heads and five wings, and last of all Moshoeshoe and his war general Makoanyane, the two of them wearing sheepskin trousers' (Haliburton 1975:114).

The presence of Moshoeshoe and his war general on this panel is of interest as their dress is also different from these others- they represent a particularly African traditional sense. It could be interpreted that Matita was instructed to tell Africans to return to their cultural and traditional roots. While in heaven, Matita was taught by an angel how to read and write. After his return to life, he spent forty days and nights on the mountains without food. Upon his

return to his community he started preaching conversion to Christianity embracing a bulk of missionary teachings. His followers insist that he was an authentic prophet with a direct line to heaven, unlike Lekganyana and Shembe who got their healing powers from a 'famous witch-doctor at Kokstad' (1964:120).

According to Mhlongo, Matita, who never met Masango, prophesied that a prophet will come from the north with amazing powers. This prophet has a jurisdiction to work in all four corners of the earth, in other words, there is no limit to his territory. He also saw in that vision a blue belt with white trimmings- it was said to be powerful and will take over all the denominations with an exception of a few like the Roman Catholic Church. The prophecy clearly indicates that this prophet will not be confined to any specific locality as his powers were greater. Incidentally, Masango was sent by Ma Nku on Episcopal visits throughout the country and neighboring countries like Lesotho and Swaziland.

Ma Nku also prophesied that a man from the east with amazing prophetic powers would come. No person will ever work like him and the heaven will use him mightily. When Masango was brought to St. John's in 1941 it was confirmed that he was the man in the prophecy. Since he was a sick man, Ma Nku put him through all the healing and cleansing processes until he was fully restored and healthy. He also got his wish of a Johanine baptism by immersion. Ma Nku is credited by all factions at St. John's for 'washing' Masango. The symbolism of 'washing' indicates that there was dirt that cluttered his path. Through the cleansing process his true potential was realized. Upon becoming a member and participating in the activities of the church his gift started to show. During his early days at St. John's a voice came upon him and told him that there will come a time when he will have to leave his job and work fulltime as a minister and healer. Since he was still new he never took that seriously.

According to Mhlongo Masango and his disciples undertook a visit to Israel in 1974 and he was well received. The situation in Israel was tense and there was always a threat of violence. During that visit he was approached by a high ranking government official who asked him to pray for peace in the country. In the narrative one gets an impression that the government of Israel acknowledged that Masango was a prophet. In keeping with his grand narrative of the power of Masango, Mhlongo said that while in his hotel bombs going off next to the hotel and he advised that people should return to

their rooms because calmness was going to prevail. This is reminiscent of the story of Jesus calming a violent storm that threatened the lives of his disciples.

From Israel he went to Rome and visited the St Peter's basilica: it was like a homecoming to him as a man who was an embodiment of St Peter. According to Mhlongo prior to his arrival in Rome there was a miracle in the aircraft. There was turbulence in the air and the aeroplane he was traveling in nearly crashed. The prophet Masango interceded with the angels for safe landing and everyone was grateful to him. According to Mhlongo, in explaining the incident, the prophet said 'I saw a snake (tonardo) holding the plane trying drag it down so that it can crash. Suddenly an angel bearing a sword came, and cut the head of the snake' (n.d. 27).

Education Dilemma

South African socio-economic, political and religious landscapes were drawn through Western Christian ideals. Formal education was a crucial aspect of the new landscape. For survival and respectability a person had to produce proof of qualification. African Christians had an interesting dilemma in their quest to embrace the foreign religious traditions and remain true to their African heritage. Pre-colonial African culture was oral and wisdom, customs, and traditions were transmitted orally. The missionary establishment privileged and valorized literacy to the point of demonizing anyone who was not literate. This point is made very clear by Isabel Hofmeyr (2002) in her discussion of African interpretations of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In these translations and interpretations of the book ignorance is equated to illiteracy- ignorance is thrown into the flames of hell.

Ways of Dealing with the Dilemma

Mhlongo is at pains to explain that Masango grew up in an environment where there were no schools except a Lower Primary School on the farm. The school went up to standard 2 (grade 4). Masango studied at this school until standard 2 and there are no further details about his schooling. Mhlongo simply makes a jump and introduce a spiritual element. He tells us that the

Holy Spirit was responsible for his education until he became a doctor of divinity. In fact, the

> presence of the Spirit is often linked to the gift of leadership in the Bible. A leader is seen as a person with more 'power' than those being led. In the Bible, this power has its source in the Spirit (Anderson 2003: 180).

The major assumption in the Bible is that such a spirit is from God. In African cosmology the spirit realm is privileged over the physical realm. The happenings in the realm of the spirit affect the physical. Making claims about receiving education at the spirit realm was meant to undercut any criticism of the lack of formal education. At the same time it reinforces the idea that this is a special individual who learnt what most learn in seven years in a matter of hours or days. The spiritual claim makes his education superior to formal education that children receive from the school system.

Teachings

Teachings at St. John's, like in most early AICs, were adapted from the teachings of John Alexander Dowie's movement. At the core of his teachings was faith and purity. Like other AICs, St. John's was against alcohol, smoking, sexual immorality, theft, murder, and other anti-social behavior. Mhlongo narrates how Masango's work led to the conversion of criminals. A case in point was a man named France who was a petty thief who came out of jail and was ministered to by Masango and ended up being one of the disciples. This is an example of number of criminals who were converted through Masango's work.

The Community of Prophets

The community of prophets exists in both the physical and spiritual realms. John Mbiti's idea of the living-dead is helpful in this regard as it creates scope for the presence of the departed members of the family in the community. Because of their closeness to the Supreme Being, ancestors have extra powers, and limitless vision. They are perceived as mediators between

the Supreme Being and the people. Prophets in AIC cosmology are perceived as mediators between the people and God. They communicate messages from God to the people, and also intercede on behalf of the people. Throughout the biography of Masango, Mhlongo deliberately uses biblical verses to place Masango within the community of prophets. In a literary move that sought to assert Masango as an authentic prophet from God (Anderson 2003:181), Mhlongo claims that when Masango was taken to heaven he did not find Mrs Nomapuleti Florah Ludlolo (nee Radebe) of Cancele, Transkei, who is famous as the 'Mother of Cancele', meaning that she was a fake prophet who embodied a spirit of an anti-Christ. Becken (1983) goes through the details of her story and how she lost favour with the community and the people who came to her place. The reader is not told who Masango saw in heaven.

According to Mhlongo, prophets have a dual existence. He justifies this assertion through the story of transfiguration (Mark 9:2-9; Matthew 17:1-13). Prophets do not die but they simply change their form of existence. They travel through time and space and are not confined to any group of people or generation. The spirits of prophets live continuously through embodiment by different people in different generations. According Engelke (2007) Johane Masowe claimed to be a John the Baptist. For him, John the Baptist is not an historic figure, the historic figure is an embodiment of the spirit that has perpetual existence. He did not believe in the Bible. Every message is always fresh from the throne of God. The Holy Spirit uses the preacher to deliver a message from God 'live and direct'.

The Prophet Sees his Departure

In African thought, especially among AmaZulu, it is held that elderly people can sense when they are about to die. They set their affairs in order by conferring blessings to their children. Mhlongo enumerates a number of instances which indicated that Baba Masango knew that his time had come. First, Baba Masango told the January 1984 national conference, which was his last one, that a voice told him to hold the tombstone unveiling ceremony of his wife Mme Annah two weeks before conference because he did not know where he would be in February. The ceremony happened with many circuits in the church not having been invited. Second, he had visions that are related to death. According to Mhlongo he had visions of bishops taking or

leading coffins to the graveyards. He asked the conference to pray for bishops in the church. He then posed a question to *abahlahlubi* (seers) about what they see about him. None of them said anything. Third, he made a few announcements but the most notable one was where he changed the date of Umgidi wase Clermont from July to the first week of May. Clermont is one of the major centres at St. Johns and this event was of great significance. According to Mhlongo Baba Masango never gave the reasons for the change and no one questioned it. Fourth, four days after the conference he delivered a sermon on the kingdom of heaven as a place of eternal rest for the saints. Baba Masango died five days after the final prophecies aged 78 and was buried on the premises of the Katlehong headquarters. The mausoleum that was erected in his honour has made this a significant sacred site for church.

Conclusions

The spirit is the life blood of AICs and the Newer Pentecostal Churches (Daneel 1993). It is the source of revelation (prophecy, illness detection, nature and impact of evil, knowledge on healing, knowledge on myth and ritual). It is also the transport between various realms of existence- it connects people to these realms of existence. At St. John's every congregation starts services by singing the song, '*Ngena nathi, asinawo amandla okungena sodwa*' (start or enter with us, for we do not have power or strength to start or enter on our own). Other AICs also spend a sizeable amount of time during their meetings inviting the presence of the spirit. Their services do not work without this important component. The spirit is asked to participate in the event by influencing its direction. The people without the presence of the spirit are incapable of having a meaningful and successful service. The spirit is expected to come and manifest in signs and wonders. The spirit is experienced more during healing events.

The article in part dealt with a case of a male Prophet who took over a church that was established by a woman. The prevailing patriarchal system did not allow for a woman to be the head of the church. Masango's genius is that he did not part with the old beliefs and practices but he inserted himself as the new authority. He acknowledged Ma Nku as his spiritual mentor or parent. He gave credit to Ma Nku for starting the church and that also rubbed

off his followers. His explanation for wrestling control from Ma Nku is that the church was losing direction and he brought it back on course.

In isiZulu there is a saying that kings or chiefs do not die but they bow out gracefully (*Inkosi iyakhothama*). They are never ill but are shaken (*inkosi iyadunguzela*). In African thought death is when the spirit is released from the confines of the physical body to the world of other spirits. Funeral rites have to be managed properly for the safe passage and incorporation into the world of ancestors. Prophets are living spirits that enter human history at certain points to transform the human condition. The historical figures are simply human embodiments. Masango, in this case, was an embodiment of two prophetic spirits (Peter and John). Like all charismatic leaders, Masango had to constantly provide proof to his followers that he was truly called through the performance of extra-ordinary acts. For Mhlongo, Masango was an extra-ordinary person. In fact, 'Baba Masango was not simply human but a creature from heaven' (n.d. 22). He would not be seen for days and then emerge with intriguing messages like 'Today I was with a congregation of the Prophets and they told me that I will do amazing things with amazing power and this church will grow bigger' (n.d. 22).

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