

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF BLACK THEOLOGY

*Dr Daryl M Balia
Senior Lecturer
Faculty of Theology
University of Durban-Westville*

INTRODUCTION

Black Theology is largely understood to be a phenomenon of the 1960s that emerged through the rise of Black Power and Black Consciousness in the face of trenchant white racism. In South Africa its origins are usually traced to the activities of the University Christian Movement and general black disenchantment with the ideology of 'multiracialism'. Scholars in South Africa are, however, unanimous that the 'roots' of Black Theology stretch further back to the nineteenth century when black revolt in missionary-controlled churches found expression in the creation of new indigenous fellowships.¹ The purpose of this essay is to offer a critical appraisal of this view but also to 'flesh out' the origins of the African indigenous church movement insofar as it reflected a black theological undertaking. My focus will be primarily on the Ethiopians whom I shall show to be the forerunners of the more recent enterprise called Black Theology. To do this I shall assume that the paradoxical struggle of Tiyo Soga and other 'progressive elites', who, though black and Christian, lacked a 'revolutionary edge' to their ideological commitment. The black experience in the United States presents striking parallels and it was there that the term 'Black Theology' was first used. My at-

1 While it is fashionable to assert the link between Black Theology and the Ethiopian origins of the African indigenous church movement in South Africa, no substantive attempt has been made to date to establish the grounds of such a claim. See for example, John W. de Gruchy's 'The Church Struggle in South Africa' (London: SPCK 1979) p156 and Allan A. Boesak's 'Black Theology Black Power' (London: Mowbrays 1976) pp38-40. The exception to the above would of course be the most comprehensive study on Ethiopianism which is published in German. See Erhard Kamphausen, *Aufaenge der Kirchlichen Unabhaengigkeitsbewegung in Suedafrika. Geschichte und Teologie der Aethiopischen Bewegung 1872-1910*, (Frankfurt: Peter Lang 1976).

tempt will therefore also be to show the influence of black American struggles for emancipation on the development of Ethiopianism in South Africa. This should not surprise even the casual observer since North American black theologian James Cone finds the 'roots' of his thinking in the experiences of the 'pre-Civil War black church, which recognised that racism and Christianity were opposites'.² Ultimately the black struggle for political liberation in this country and the historical quest for an indigenous expression of the Christian faith bear an intrinsic relation to each other and may never be severed.

When Black Theology had become 'the new talking point - like a jackal in the foul-run' in the early 1970s, G.C. Oosthuizen observed that 'for nearly a century one has had black theology in South Africa - unwritten but alive in the dances and songs of the people and actively practiced by them. It is Christianity on the march.'³ How true and yet Oosthuizen's observation was not shared by most white Christians who failed to understand Black Theology's *raison d'être* and criticised its political import. Many simply refused to see it as a painful reflection of the failure of White Christianity in South Africa to adequately challenge the black Christian context. Blacks were cautioned by white theologians about reducing the gospel to socio-political liberation, that 'polarization' would occur between black and white, and also, of 'seriously underestimating the reality of the power of sin in human life.'⁴ In their avid search to construct this new theology, Black theologians sought to reinterpret their history for it was acknowledged that they had 'a history of struggle against white oppression, a history of dependence upon God as their Creator, Provider and Redeemer. Black church history in particular cannot be ignored if Black Theology is to speak to the condition of black people.'⁵ Blacks felt justified in using the term 'black' as it spoke of 'the whole history of domination, oppression, privation, disenfranchisement and

2 James H. Cone, Black Theology and Black Liberation, *The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa*, Ed. Basil Moore (Atlanta: John Knox 1974) p48

3 G.C. Oosthuizen, Black Theology in Historical Perspective, *The South African Journal of African Affairs*, 3:1 (1973) p77

4 See the discussion in my 'Christian Resistance to Apartheid' (Johannesburg: Skotaville 1989) pp74-77.

5 Elliot K.M. Mgojo, Prolegomenon to the Study of Black Theology, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Dec 1977, p30

discrimination by the Whites.’⁶ Black theologians of the modern era have thus had no difficulty in establishing the historical connections between their theology and the black struggle against colonialism of the previous century. The question naturally arises why ‘Black Theology’ in its peculiar construct arose about a hundred years after its roots were first manifested? Black Theology’s own answer is :

‘It is a recent discovery on the part of the black man to realize that he is entitled to interpret the Bible in the light of his own experience and presumptions. For the first time the Bible has become an open book in the sense of being a liberating actor by enabling the black man to think creatively about his spiritual existence.’⁷

One should perhaps add the renaissance in black thinking via Black Consciousness with which Black Theology formed an ideologically ‘strategic alliance’ to explain its ‘resurgence’ in the latter 1960s. But to trace the historical roots of Black Theology one has first to turn to its foremost pioneer and the liberation struggle he ignited.

1 ELEMENTS OF THE ‘AMATILE’ PROGRAMME

Nehemiah Tile, generally acknowledged to be the founder of the first black church free from white missionary control, was mostly active in Tembuland where political turmoil was the order of the day since the Great Trek of 1834. In addition to numerous Frontier Wars in which Tembus actively participated in challenging colonial oppression, there was the Shakan crisis (Mfecane) resulting in many clashes and migrations which in turn gave rise to deep divisions and considerable tensions in Tembu society. The cattle killing episode (1856-7) cost the lives of thousands and as economic devastation took its toll on those who survived, desperate migration and the search for new options increased. Tembuland was constantly under threat of annexation to the Cape Colony. One attempt had failed in 1880 and it was not until

6 T. Simon Gqubule, What is Black Theology, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, Sept 1974, p19

7 Manas Buthelezi, The Christian Presence in Today’s South Africa, *Journal of Theology for South Africa*, Sept 1976, p8

1885 that legislation to this effect was passed. In 1873, Ngangelizwe, who was Paramount Chief of the Tembus, was deceived into permitting a representative of the Cape Colonial government in his territory. This agent subsequently negotiated with Tembu sub-chiefs to recognize the new authority at Ngangelizwe's expense. Ngangelizwe was soon facing 'the dissolution of the inner structure of the Tembu tribe of which the unity and exclusivity was symbolised by the person of the paramount.'⁸ It is against this background, albeit cursory, that the Amatile problem with white rule must be gauged.

Tile had been a pioneer evangelist for the Wesleyan Methodist Church who was commended for his 'incessant and self-denying labours'.⁹ He successfully completed a theological course at Healdtown and was advanced in his probation towards becoming an ordained minister. But on his move to Xora in 1882, he is reported to have come into 'open conflict' with his superintendent minister, Revd Theophilus Chubb, who complained about being kept in the dark regarding Tile's political activities. Tile was involved at this time in a broad movement of black political emancipation from white colonial rule and was thus instrumental in drawing up a series of petitions calling for a reduction of magistrates in Tembuland. These magistrates operated under a chief magistrate in the one territory to the extreme discomfort of Ngangelizwe who was experiencing an erosion of his power. Having various magistracies encouraged 'separatism' within the Tembu chiefdom and such cause for concern was understandable. The petitions implied a rejection of white minority rule and a desire for the distant and informal government of Queen Victoria.¹⁰ But this request must be seen as a strategic political manoeuvre for Tile's ultimate objective was the supremacy of the 'natives' in the land of their birth. Ngangelizwe enlisted Tile as his chief spokesperson as his old councillors knew little about organising the Tembu people against colonial rule and restoring their chief to his former glory. The secretary for native

8 Hennie L. Pretorius, Nehemiah Tile - A 19th Century Pioneer of the Development of African Christian Theology. Paper read at Religious Studies Forum, University of Transkei, 4-5 March 1988, p32

9 For further details on Tile's personal life and background, see my 'Black Methodists and White Supremacy in South Africa' (Durban: Institute for Black Research, University of Natal 1991) pp54-56.

10 C.C. Saunders, Tile and the Tembu Church: Politics and Independency on the Cape Eastern Frontier in the late Nineteenth Century, *Journal of African Studies*, 9:4, 1970, p557

affairs, Mr De Wet, complained about 'that man Tile' speaking at a meeting he attended in Umtata:

'He did not speak the words of the Tembu people ... Now friend Ngangelizwe, listen to me, have nothing to do with Tile, he will do harm to your people.'¹¹

Tile was on another occasion illegally arrested on a charge of inciting certain chiefs to resist lawful authority and the payment of hut taxes which Tembus believed were being used by the magistrates for their personal use. The system of taxation had the effect of reducing the powers of the chiefs as well and hence the Tembu protests.

The Tembu political campaign was orchestrated through the press when Tile in no uncertain terms requested, 'we want to rule our own country' and 'we want the unity of the Tembu tribes', and so for this reason, 'we do not want our land to be in farms.'¹²

Tile was equally excited about the possibility of Tembuland being 'filled up with education and Christianity' so that 'civilization and justice' would prevail. It is possibly true, as the *Cape Mercury* reported, that Tembus believed if they 'were firm and united, Government would abandon the territory, as it had done Basutoland, and then there would be no more hut tax no more fines and penalties to pay, nor licenses to the Government; as these would all become the property of the Chief.'¹³ In setting forth the aspirations of his people and in championing their cause, Tile was proving to be an embarrassment to his ecclesiastical superiors who preferred to see him confined to 'evangelistic work'. The Wesleyan Church finally decided that Tile should be removed from his constituency into the Cape Colony itself, a move which Tile resisted and over which he subsequently offered his resignation. Barely a year later Mr De Wet, in trying 'to prevent that agitator (Tile) from carrying out his designs', was similarly considering expelling Tile from Tembuland.¹⁴ It is not unlikely that the state collaborated with the church on this occasion

11 Under Secretary of Native Affairs to Chief Magistrate Tembuland, 25 April 1885 (CMT)1/9. See also De Wet's letter to Ngangelizwe 28 November 1884, Cape Archives.

12 Cape Argus, 23 June 1884

13 16 March 1893, under the heading 'Tembuland Troublers'

14 SNA to CMT, 30 September 1884, CMT 1/8

in attempting to curtail Tile's political influence. For the initial charge against Tile by the church was that he refused to divulge state secrets.

It cannot be doubted that Tile had become impatient with European control and domination in the Wesleyan Church. The white missionaries had accused Tile of stirring up a feeling of hostility against the magistrates, of addressing a public meeting on the sabbath, and of donating an ox at Dalinyebo's circumcision, who was then heir to the Tembu chieftaincy. One wonders how it was justified that a minister be disciplined by the church for challenging the authority of an illegal government or for faithfully adhering to a noble cultural practice. Still Tile was portrayed as the villain who was supposed to have become so 'angered by the disgrace thus attaching to him'¹⁵ that he set out to form his own church over which he aspired to the dignity of Bishop or Pope'.¹⁶ In truth a consultation with Ngangelizwe and his chief councillors was held after Tile split with the Wesleyans and it then decided that a National Church be established in Tembuland with Tile as head. According to Skota, the 'whole Tembu tribe was soon summoned and informed' about this new development and it was not long before a church building was erected at Mqekeweni, the Royal Kraal.¹⁷ The Tembus were anxious to adapt the kernel of the Christian gospel to their cultural heritage as is apparent from a prayer which Tile composed. It was set to a simple chant which by command of the chief was sung in all the new Tembu churches. Entitled 'Umtandazo waba-Tembu' (Prayer of the Tembus), it begins with a request to God to bless 'our king' (ukumkani wetu), 'his Child' (nomtwanawake), and the 'Tembu tribe' (isizwe saba-Tembu). The prayer also contains a petition for prosperity (intlalo entle), which Lea notes, was 'not under (pantsi), as is the usual expression among Natives when speaking of the ruling power, but "together with Queen Victoria" (kunye neNkosazana U-Vitoriya) -a term which suggests more of equality than subjection.'¹⁸ The prayer closed with a three-fold request for God to save Ngangelizwe, his child and the Tembu tribe:

15 Cape Mercury, 16 March 1893

16 CMT to USNA, 17 December 1890, N.A. 115, 143

17 The African Yearly Register, Ed. T.D. Mveli Skota (Johannesburg: R.L. Esson & Co. 1930) p96

18 Allen Lea, The Native Separatist Church Movement in South Africa (Cape Town: Juta and Co. 1926) p25

Sindisa Tixo O-Ngangelizwe
Sindisa Tixo nomtwana wake
Sindisa Tixo isizwe saba-Tembu

In this context it is vital to fully appreciate the 'black' theological framework of Tile's endeavours. The resident magistrate in Willowvale, Tembuland, Martin William Liefeldt, was writing to his superior in Umtata in 1902 about there being for years a 'propaganda' among Blacks claiming 'Africa for the African' and 'supremacy for the Native'.¹⁹ Black independent ministers were found to be 'preaching a doctrine that the native as owner of Africa should throw off the European yoke and claim his own'. Their political objective was 'the supremacy of the Black Race.'²⁰ These statements were made in connection with origins of the 'sect' known as the 'Amatile'. Liefeldt enclosed sworn statements, one from Veldtman Bikitsha, a Fingo headman and Wesleyan circuit steward at Butterworth, to the effect that Tile's secession 'had for its object a political move to free the Native from European control, and for the ultimate supremacy of the Coloured races throughout South Africa.'²¹ Bikitsha claimed that his information was obtained from Tile himself who had tried to influence him to join the Amatile movement. Another statement indicated that Tile's successor, Jonas Goduka, preached 'emancipation from all control by the White man' while other ministers told their adherents that 'European ministers severely taxed their Native congregations to fill their own pockets while the object of the Tile Church was to benefit the poor of their own community.'²²

In light of the above steps seem to have been taken to permit only Black ministers to conduct services in Tembuland.²³ The government refused to recognise marriages conducted by 'Amatile' ministers and after Tile's death in 1891, the Tembu Church suffered many setbacks. The remnant which remained under the leadership of a certain Anthony at the turn of the century continued to press home the argument that 'so long as we remain under the

19 N.A.498/96, 20 February 1902

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 CMT to USNA, 17 December 1890, N.A. 115,143

supervision of European Ministers we cannot aspire to become a nation.'²⁴ The Tembu Church emphasised the unity of black people in the face of a God who had blessed the Tembu people with equal rights and privileges. Tile may have passed on and his church's influence checked by the government but his vision of black empowerment, black solidarity to counteract white repression, his conception of common blackness and ultimately, black liberation of all the oppressed peoples of South Africa, was to form a major ideological component of the 'Ethiopian' programme that was being orchestrated by Black Christians in the Transvaal. His use of a Christian framework to undertake a project of emancipation from white control, both in ecclesiastical and political terms, constituted a new strategy that was 'revolutionary' for its time. The Amatile did not immediately regard themselves as great interpreters of the holy writ; this was hardly possible when the rudimentary skills of reading and writing were only just being imparted. But those like Tile who did enjoy a degree of educational advancement were not slow to realize the discrepancy between the word and deed of the gospel the missionaries extolled. The increase in the number of 'native' conversions was paralleled by the confiscation of lands owned by the Tembus and if Wesleyan Christianity was unable to 'stand with the oppressed', another fellowship (church) with a more relevant theology (black) would. The Amatile were rejected by their kith and kin in their own day but their legacy was to become a most powerful vehicle for the liberation of all black South Africans about a hundred years later.

2 ELEMENTS OF THE 'ETHIOPIAN' PROGRAMME

The influence of the Amatile was not confined to Tembuland alone for as the gold and mining industry flourished in the Transvaal, black labourers from all parts of the country flocked to the Witwatersrand only to experience extinction of their culture and character in squalid working conditions. It was not unnatural for these people to take their 'religious baggage' along to their new destination for how else were they to find 'a place to feel at home' in derelict 'native reserves'. The doctrine that 'the native as rightful owner of Africa should fling off all control by the White Man, and himself govern his

24 N.A.498/96, 20 February 1902

own affairs'²⁵ would persist even with Ngangelizwe's son, Baalam, who was a Amatile preacher in Pretoria. Mangena Mokone, another Wesleyan minister based in Pretoria, described as a 'superior preacher, very useful and acceptable', was growing increasingly agitated by discriminatory practices against black ministers in the Wesleyan Methodist Church.²⁶ Like Tile he shared a particular concern for the educational life of Black people and was instrumental in the Kilnerton school being built for Blacks which he served as teacher and principal. In 1892 Mokone became convinced that changes to correct the racially discriminating policies in the church would not be forthcoming and was thus forced to resign. He announced his intention to begin an 'independent' mission and school among Blacks only to discover that his grievances against the Wesleyan Church were shared by other indignant colleagues. Together with about fifty adherents Mokone started the Ethiopian Church on 20 November 1892 in an old tin shack. Psalm 68:31 ('Ethiopian shall soon stretch out her hand unto God') was found to be of particular significance as they interpreted this text to refer to all the African races. This was the first time it seemed that Ethiopia was used to refer to all of Black Africa. Mokone had in mind the pan-African dream of sending forth missionaries to evangelise the African continent and his vision was enthusiastically shared by many. His preachers urged him to forge a unity with the Tembu Church in the Transkei and it was not long before a Tembu preacher, a Mr P Kuze, came upcountry to assist Mokone. Membership in the Ethiopian Church increased dramatically as white missionary churches complained about their 'sheep' being stolen.

It was almost by accident that Mokone learned of the existence of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church which had also come into being against a background of racial segregation.²⁷ Spurred on by his curiosity Mokone wrote to Bishop Henry Turner of the AME Church, informing him of the Ethiopian Church which he emphasized was 'entirely managed by us Blacks'. In the exchanges that followed, a Tembu named John Tule wrote to the AME Church newsletter *'The Voice of Missions'* complaining that white

25 Ibid.

26 See Mokone's list of grievances or 'Founder's declaration of independence' in my 'Black Methodists and White Supremacy in South Africa' pp70-72.

27 See J.R. Coan's 'Expansion of Missions of the AME Church in South Africa 1896-1908 (Connecticut: Hartford Seminary Foundation 1961) p94-103.

missionaries were becoming government agents in sowing seeds of division within the black community. Turner saw Tule's letter to be 'a heavy indictment against the white missionaries in South Africa' and felt ready to 'come and deliver them (Ethiopians) from the chains of sin, and the treachery of our brothers in White who pretend to be very holy till they get to be government agents'.²⁸ It needed, however the more charismatic and dominant personality of another Wesleyan minister, James Dwane, to plead the Ethiopian cause in the United States before the Ethiopian Church amalgamated as the new fourteenth district of the AME Church in South Africa. Dwane was a highly respected and a 'competent' Wesleyan who went to England to raise funds for a black college of education believing as he did that higher education was critical for African development. On his return he was plagued by his white superiors with a series of questions and innuendoes as to his trustworthiness and subsequently resigned to join the Ethiopians. One source has suggested that Dwane had offered to resign as early as 1884 after unsuccessfully protesting against 'what he considered to be class (discriminatory) legislation in the Church based on the colour line' but changed his mind.²⁹ If this were the case, it probably meant Dwane was influenced by Tile's decision to resign some months earlier (whom he seems to have personally known from their stay as student ministers in Healdtown).³⁰ In the United States Dwane excelled himself in drawing vast crowds and working them up into a state of enthusiastic generosity while assuring them that 'the Africans would never allow the White man to ride roughshod over their country' and 'would say to the European nations, Hands Off!'³¹ Like Mokone, Dwane was keen to spread missions to the west of Africa and even planned on collecting funds to send to King Menelik of Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

It was to be Dwane's appointment as general superintendent and vicar bishop that proved to be a major source of controversy within the Ethiopian Church and an 'unfortunate cause of subsequent difficulties' in the movement. Bishop Turner visited South Africa in 1898 and apart from ordaining

28 The Voice of Missions, March 1896. Quoted in J.M. Chirenje 'Ethiopianism and Afro-Americans in Southern Africa 1883-1916.' (Los Angeles: Louisiana State University 1987) p54

29 See J.M. Chirenje, p20

30 C.C. Saunders, p554

31 E. Roux, Time longer than Rope (London: Gollanz 1948) p81

several ministers to the newly constituted district of the AME Church, formally appointed Dwane to the office of Vicar Bishop. This step only served to remind Dwane of an inferior status which he detested. Mokone was ill at ease about the leadership issue and almost himself resigned but his deep respect for Turner, his own integrity, and his determination to prove that Black people could work together forced him to reconsider.³² Dwane, though, resigned to become leader of a black 'Order of Ethiopia' within the Anglican Church. Whether it was a case of 'today's seditious Ethiopian' becoming 'tomorrow's upholder of the white man's regime' is debatable. It was certainly not an act of 'real statesmanship' on Dwane's part for to some he appeared to have betrayed the Ethiopian struggle. Yet he may have found his move expedient in terms of the broader Ethiopian programme. For the Resident Magistrate at Willowvale, himself an Anglican, did express his firm belief to Umtata that 'although the Order of Ethiopia may for the present, and in order to gain certain ends, have subjected itself to the control of our Bishops, their ambition will not be appeased until they consider themselves strong enough to throw off the British yoke, their first step being a severance from the control of the Anglican Church which they now seek to employ as a cloak to secure recognition.'³³ If this is to be believed, it certainly alludes to Dwane's commitment to a shift in power relations and the attempt to secure freedom for Blacks in both the political and ecclesiastical realms which remained white in orientation.

3 CONCLUSION

It is lamentable that the formation of African indigenous movements and churches has been subjected to rigid categorisation and falsified typologies by laboratory technicians who have experienced little of the ruthless world of colonial conquest. In the midst of all the 'transmogrifications' one is left theologically bewildered and semantically confused and the subject together with its subjects suffer as a result. Ethiopianism has become that type of movement characterized by political dissent (usually Blacks wrangling over the colour bar in white missionary-controlled churches) while 'Zionist'-type

32 Cf. the discussion in J.M. Chirenje, pp73-81

33 N.A.498/96, 20 February 1902

churches are supposed to be 'syncretistic' combining 'healing, speaking with tongues, purification rites, and taboos'.³⁴ Even more controversial has been a new category of indigenous churches - 'Messianic' where a prophet like Isaiah Shembe of the *amaNazaretha* in Natal is afforded a position of mediatorship between his followers and the supernatural forces and where Christ recedes to the background³⁵. To a limited extent one may be in sympathy with the use of such labels to understand complex phenomena but their overuse or misuse tends to easily distort the historical experiences of people who for the most part are only now writing their own history. It may well be argued that all secessions have been directly or indirectly motivated by the apartheid ideology and in this way qualify to be regarded as 'Ethiopian'. Similarly a case can be conceivably made for all indigenous churches to be seen as 'syncretistic' since countless cultural practices by black Christians generally (in whatever church) do not conform to white Christian etiquette or Western values. Blacks, when they have written about this aspect of their history, have urged caution and have preferred 'speaking for ourselves.'³⁶ My contention is that Ethiopianism as it was propagated by black Christians in the previous century, however classified, constituted a black theological enterprise to a degree that it now becomes possible for us to view it as the 'first fruits' of Black Theology in South Africa.

I have been careful to highlight the political overtones of the Christian praxis of men like Tile, Mokone and Dwane since the hallmark of 'modern' Black Theology is its commitment to 'struggle' for liberation in church and society. Progressive elites like Tiyo Soga and the secession of P J Mzimba have been excluded from this discussion because of their own 'ambivalence' in the struggle for black emancipation. By this token some may justifiably argue that Dwane should himself be excluded but since his career overlapped with Mokone's to such a great extent, it is difficult to discuss one without reference to the other. Soga is hailed for having made a 'unique contribution to

34 See, for example, B.G.M. Sundkler's 'Bantu Prophets in South Africa (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1961) Second Edition, pp53-59.

35 See G.C. Oosthuizen, *Post Christianity in Africa* (Stellenbosch: Wever 1968)

36 See the incisive account of their churches by the leaders themselves in 'Speaking for Ourselves' (Johannesburg: Institute for Contextual Theology 1985). Cf. also B. Goba, *An Agenda for Black Theology* (Johannesburg: Skotaville 1988) pp49-55, and, I.J. Mosala, *African Independent Churches: a study in socio-theological protest, Resistance and Hope* Ed. Charles Villa-Vicencio and John W. de Gruchy (Cape Town: David Philip 1985) pp103-111.

the origins of Black nationalism'³⁷, but one has to be more circumspect here. Soga, who preceded Tile, advocated a typically Western approach to African customs and traditions - he condemned circumcision and saw the cattle-killing episode of 1856-7 as the work of his 'poor infatuated countrymen' who had become 'dupes of designing imposters'.³⁸ He took the rare step of marrying across the colour line and sent his children to a White school abroad. His many hymns did not continue African pioneer missionary Ntsikana's tradition of using indigenous melodies. Soga seems also to have adopted a 'neutral' position on colonial authority which implied support for the status quo.³⁹ To portray Soga as a 'black' theologian in light of the above would be a tenuous exercise but I do not deny that it can be done. Mzimba's case is more difficult as he identified with the Ethiopian programme when he founded his African Presbyterian Church in 1898. One particular incident has cast an historical shadow on his illustrious life and from which only ambiguity has resulted in interpreting him. In an address to the Lovedale Literary Society (reprinted in *Imvo*) he outraged Blacks generally by declaring 'Let the White man rule, and the South Africa people be out of politics'.⁴⁰ He reasoned that involvement in politics by Blacks in the USA had led to disaster and so Africans in South Africa should learn from that experience:

'Let us be content to be ruled by the colonist. Let us only have to do with politics in order to encourage those white men who desire to give us schools and books ... The ignorant, poor and superstitious native cannot rule the intelligent, experienced, wealthy colonists'.

This speech turned out to be most controversial and was even discussed in the White newspapers. Perhaps more research has to be done to establish Mzimba's proper place in Black Christian history.

Whites in South Africa observed the Ethiopian struggle with much disdain believing its primary objective to be a challenge of white supremacy. The deep underlying current and 'morbidly active' race feeling was the distin-

37 See D. Williams, *Umfundisi. A biography of Tiyo Soga 1829-1871*, Lovedale, 1978, p97

38 John A. Chalmers, *Tiyo Soga: A Page of South African Missionary Work*, London: Hodder and Stoughton 1877, p140

39 See W.A. Saayman, *Tiyo soga and Nehemiah Tile: Black Pioneers in Mission and Church*, *Missionalia* 17:2, August 1989, p97

40 *Imvo*, 30 December 1886

guishing feature of an Ethiopian. The guiding principle that governed the Ethiopian's outlook in life was 'Africa for the Africans' and a resilient No to white domination. Christianity, far from being a personal religion for a future salvation, was turned into a functional guide to secure dignity and justice in this world. In the 'sociology of intentions' it may have been a 'political dodge' to weaken Black people into political submission but Ethiopians boldly challenged this assumption. Ministers of the gospel who experienced a degree of ease in rereading the holy texts tested missionary conduct and discovered it was riddled with contradictions. Unlike many of their elitist contemporaries, the Ethiopians believed themselves capable of and responsible for the liberation of the black masses, albeit sometimes naively. Careful not to forsake their cultural heritage, they incorporated significant customs and traditions of indigenous life to make Christianity compatible with their worldview. Unable to accept an eternal subordinate status, Ethiopians obliged to create new leadership structures where management of their *own* affairs was possible without European supervision and harassment. It is most likely that tribal affiliations would have been transcended in this scenario as early stirrings of black consciousness and black nationalism arose to replace erstwhile warring anger. These 'marginal men' and women were throughout committed to the enhancement of African aspirations and in the changing society education was regarded as the paramount key to success and achievement.

The political rhetoric and simple sermons of the Ethiopian leaders possibly lacked stylish precision and theological polish but these rudimentary elements of their project were to persist in the formalisation of black Christian reflection many years later. That a particular 'theology' was being orally created and continually supplemented in the Ethiopian struggle cannot be denied; it was, however, a theology whose immediate future was unknown, whose tenets remained undefined but whose context impinged upon its adherents most severely. Black Theology in short was being born in the cover of darkness.