

Kwasizabantu – a South African community

Foreword by Dr. Gabriele Lademann-Priemer¹

In the 1980's I visited the South African community Kwasizabantu in KwaZulu Natal and interviewed Erlo Stegen, the founder and leader. He emphasized that he had no intention of starting a new church, but rather an interconfessional missionary organization. Once people were converted to Christianity through healing or by evangelization they would be referred back to churches in their own area.

I was not completely sure if this was true in all cases; yet I experienced that missionaries from the Evangelical Lutheran Church as well as many other visitors from Europe, were very open-minded about Kwasizabantu, made contacts easily and readily exchanged thoughts with them.

Furthermore I saw on the location land that was being cultivated by the community and in their store sold quality products at reasonable prices. Also the Spar shops in the surrounding area that were connected to Kwasizabantu, their produce proved to be good and the prices fair.

Yet many South African and Lutheran ministers were very critical, but without being able to give the exact reason for their skepticism.

Mr. Stegen emphasized to me, that every three months they would go to the "heathen areas" in what was formerly known as a Zulu homeland. Especially in the area around Tugela Ferry witch doctors and soothsayers were converted and publicly burned all their witchcraft charms. I have seen photos of such burning ceremonies. Tugela Ferry lies in the Msinga district and during the time of Apartheid it was a Zulu homeland. Here the Scottish missionary society had maintained a hospital there. The traditional Zulu religion has long stood its ground in the Msinga district.

Besides that I wondered, where all these witch doctors who were constantly being converted could have come from. It seemed a bit odd to me and I questioned myself if these conversions and ritualistic burnings were somehow staged?

Some interviews with people from Kwasizabantu provided various stories, that one had been healed of illness and another from alcoholism by Mr. Stegen's Christian influence. To the African conception this was nothing really spectacular, as similar stories of healings are heard everywhere.

The Europeans who visit Kwasizabantu for a longer period, especially the women, somehow gave me an impression of being worn out and exhausted. According to a statement made by the leaders they had come to stay at the healing centre for a period of twelve days.

Later I learnt that there were also branches of Kwasizabantu in Europe. A visit to the German leadership made it quite clear, after some critical questions on my part, that men and women are treated equally, that they strive for ecumenical contact with churches in nearby communities and that any complaints about incidents would be investigated.

Here follows a contribution made by Mr. Albert Pilon from the Netherlands, who did research on the community and interviewed many ex-members in Europe and South Africa.

¹ Dr. Gabriela Lademann is in service with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the district Nord Elbien in Hamburg, as an advisor on world views, sects and cults. She has done research on religious ceremonies concerning illness and healing among the Zulus in comparison with the Western religious forms of healing.

ERLO STEGEN, THE KING AND HIS CULT

A brief study of the origin of the multiracial religious community Kwasizabantu in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa and its spread to Europe with the socio-psychological consequences experienced by its followers.

By Albert Pilon

Introduction

In the year 2000 a constant stream of rumors started, that put Kwasizabantu and its leader, Erlo Stegen, in a bad light. A commission of the South African Evangelical Alliance led by Rev. Moss Nltha² declared that Kwasizabantu was beginning to look like a sect, because they see themselves as an exclusive way to God. He based his decision on the testimonies of 20 ex-members who appeared before the commission. After that newspaper columns appeared full of alleged deception, power abuse, secret funds, forced divorces, rape cases, corporal punishment, a case of manslaughter and connections with the secret service during the time of Apartheid. Up to 1999 reputed theologians, from various countries visited Kwasizabantu more than once, and generally wrote positively about Kwasizabantu. In the academic world different journal articles appeared that identified themselves with Kwasizabantu. Dr. K.E. Koch and Dr. P. Beyerhaus, German theologians, had close connections with Kwasizabantu.

Who is Erlo Stegen?

Erlo Stegen³ was born in 1935 and grew up in South Africa as a farmer's son. His forefathers were the descendants of German immigrants. They came from Northern Germany and took to heart the work, '*Gottes Rufer in der Heide*': by Louis Harms⁴. He was the founder of the Hermannsburger missionary society that had pioneered the work among the Zulus in Natal. As a result of his work Evangelical Lutheran Churches were started for both Zulus and whites. Stegen grew up in a white Evangelical Lutheran church and was under the influence of Rev. Anton Engelbrecht, who was the minister in Lilienthal from 1945 to 1951. Engelbrecht was an intelligent man with charisma, who later broke with church authority and established an own independent congregation.⁵ Stegen was under his influence for 23 years, first as a member of the congregation, thereafter as student at his Bible school and finally as his assistant evangelist. The forming of Stegen's character, his religious development and his concept of missions were undeniably determined by Engelbrecht.

What is Kwasizabantu?

Kwasizabantu is a multiracial religious community in Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa that came into existence through a supposed revival of the Christian faith. In 1970 Erlo Stegen acquired property nearby Kranskop, located a Zulu and a white area and named it Kwasizabantu (place

² Evangelical Alliance of South Africa, 2000. Report of 23 June concerning Kwasizabantu Mission. Pietermaritzburg. Ca. twenty ex-members and co-workers have testified before a jury.

³ DU TOIT W, 1990. God's Mercy – The story of Kwasizabantu (Afrikaans), publication with all rights reserved by du Toit, Durban: pg. 16-21.

⁴ PAGEL A, 1978. Ludwig Harms – Gottes Rufer in der Heide, Erlangen: Verlag der Ev. Luth. Mission (D).

⁵ BECKEN Hans-Jürgen, 1960. Appointed by the Ev.- Luth. Hermannsburger Mission at Hermannsburg, Germany he drew up a report about the activities of Engelbrecht. Archief Herm. Mission (D).

where people are helped). On this location he built homes, schools and an auditorium with a seating capacity for 8000. He started a number of enterprises, which grew into an important economic factor, creating employment opportunities. At present there are about 1500 residents. Kwasizabantu draws people from all over the world, who want to “examine their spiritual life in the light of the revival”. Regularly there are approximately 50 visitors from Europe staying there.

What is revival?

Revival is a concept used by Christians who are seeking spiritual renewal. They experience their spiritual and church life as barren and dry. By prayer and devotion they are trying to move God to bring about change in their lives. Sometimes individuals, churches or whole areas are moved by the Spirit of God, of which the effects can be seen many years later. The search for revival is genuine. Unfortunately the search does not always end the way it should, as in the case of Kwasizabantu.

The beginning of Stegen’s revival 1966

Stegen started his career as an evangelist and for 12 years conducted tent-evangelism among the Zulus, but without success⁶. To get out of this impasse he tried all sorts of charismatic methods and visited, among others, the Zionists (who are the Zionists⁷) looking for the key to their success⁸. When nothing seemed to work he lost all hope. During that period he met daily with a number of Zulus in Maphumulo to pray. One day they concluded that God was searching for someone who could function as His channel through whom He could communicate with them. Not long after that the “Spirit” descended upon the Zulu woman Masaga (*uthole uMoya*)⁹. She became Stegen’s prayer woman (*abathandazi*), whom he has consulted ever since. By Stegen’s meeting with this Zulu woman an intertwining of the traditional Zulu religion and the Christian faith took place. An inter-religious experiment that probably continues to this day: a white missionary puts a Zulu woman into a trance and then claims to have direct access to God. He immediately receives answers to all his questions and in this way he is precisely informed as to what God’s will is¹⁰. This is the exact reason why everybody must listen to him. Stegen felt that his experience was so important that he called upon people to allow him and his Zulu prophetess to examine their spiritual life¹¹. He made these trance sessions known everywhere with the result that people came from far and wide. Stegen called these trances ‘the breakthrough to the revival’¹². Gradually a few more prophetesses joined them. Experiences of heat as if caused by fire, healings, release from bondage, exorcism, the gift of tongues, dreams and visions came forth like a tidal wave¹³. Now at Kwasizabantu Zulu prophetesses are called “the praying mammas”. Stegen maintains

⁶ STEGEN E, 1993. Revival begins with yourself, Middelstum (NL): Stg. Kwasizabantu Mission, pg. 41.

⁷ SUNDKLER, BGM 1976. Zulu Zion, and some Swazi Zionists, London: Oxford University Press

⁸ REDINGER E, former congregation member and co-worker at Claridge, co-worker of Stegen from 1967-1968, interview on 28-12-2006.

⁹ MBANGO O, co-worker of Stegen in 1967, witness in 2001

¹⁰ REDINGER E, *ibid.* witness, points 34 and 35.

¹¹ BARTELS H, former congregation member of Claridge, interview on 13-11-2004.

¹² REDINGER E, *ibid.* interview on 14-07-2006.

¹³ The spirit first came over Magasa, a.k.a. Hilda Dube. Later Josephina Ntsinbande, Helen Mzila and two daughters of Dube, Thofози and Lindiwe also joined them (MBANGO O, witness in 2001).

that they prophecy by the Holy Spirit (*ukuprofetha*); this should actually be understood as soothsaying (*ukubhula*) as done by the traditional *isangoma*¹⁴.

After forty years and due to a large turnover of members there are few left who know exactly what the role of Stegen and his Zulu prophetesses played. During the last decades Stegen has purposely kept new members uninformed of these prophetic activities. They reject the existence of these activities, calling these accusations lies and slander. With all this Stegen has come into a dilemma: on one hand he uses the trance sessions for managing his movement, and on the other hand he is financially dependent on Christians who would never approve of these inter-religious experiments.

Regulations for the members as the result of these revelations

As a result of these dreams and visions all sorts of rules and regulations were imposed on the followers, these led to a group behavioral code of conduct, a holy doctrine from which may not be deviated¹⁵. A written document of rules for this 'higher spiritual way' does not exist. Sin is, in the first place, the transgression of the code of conduct, which would bring the revival to a standstill and plunge the whole movement into ruin.

For women the skirt is a religious symbol and jeans are forbidden for men and women alike. The striving for absolute holiness is manifested by the division of boys and girls. A former pupil of the Kwasizabantu school made known that after the school holidays there were inspections to make sure that the girls had not lost their virginity, these inspections were carried out by older Zulu women¹⁶. The manner in which a young man ought to court a young woman and the rules for marriage are one of the inviolable fundamental foundations of Kwasizabantu¹⁷.

Sexual relations before marriage is not only seen as evil, but engaged couples are forbidden to communicate or to visit in order get to know each other. Whoever objects or diverges from this rule is excommunicated. This applies to the marriage candidates as well as their parents. The leaders see this as a holy doctrine which will protect the movement from corruption.

Despite the 'revival' racism was still practiced among the white members of Kwasizabantu as late as 1975. Stegen did not want to tolerate this any longer and decided to take measures against this problem. A conference was held on a farm close to Kranskop, where the 11 year old Zulu prophetess Lindiwe was used. While in a trance she made known which children and adults had to attend. Subsequently Stegen strongly urged these to attend the conference¹⁸. To Lindiwe was revealed the sins of racism of the participants, which had to be broken with¹⁹. Those attended were allowed to leave after Lindiwe (in trance) received very clear indication that everything was complied with.

As punishment for sins toddlers, children and teenagers were beaten black and blue until they

¹⁴ Critics blame the AIC's (African Independent Churches) of often confusing *ukuprofetha* (prophets) and *ukubhula* (soothsayers) (Vgl. ZULU M / LADEMANN-PRIEMER G, 1992. Sonderheft 14: Gospel and Zulu-Customs. Marburg: Africana Marburgiensia, pg. 35).

¹⁵ DAMRON G, article about habits and customs d.d. 13-01-2000.

¹⁶ NATAL WITNESS, 02-02-2000: Dozens tell their own stories of abuse at KZN mission.

¹⁷ PECKHAM C, 1999. In his *Assessment of Ksb* (19-02) Peckham points out the method of marriage that came into use through a certain dream. This dream became one of the most controversial dogmas of Kwasizabantu.

¹⁸ MABASO B, co-worker of Stegen from 1967-2000, interview on 15-11-2004. Redinger E, *ibid.* interview on 11-11-2004.

¹⁹ The emphasis was focused specifically on the transgression of racism, but also that of other sins.

bled. Stegen let the children pray before the beating and afterwards thank God for the punishment inflicted. Some of them still bear the scars till this day and others still suffer from the traumatic consequences of Stegen's horror²⁰. Many of these victims have turned their back to the faith. The inhuman corporal punishment continued up to the early 1990's according to the South African Evangelical Alliance in their report in 2000.

Stegen's European publicity campaign

Stegen's greatest wish was to make his revival known in Europe just as his teacher, Anton Engelbrecht, had done. He realized that if he wanted to succeed he would have to publish a book about his revival.

When Stegen came into contact with Dr. Koch in the 1970's, he convinced him to write a book about the revival. Stegen provided him with the information: he created a new past and collected all sorts of miracles from his practice as native prophet and healer and not only of himself but of others as well.²¹ He led Koch down the garden path by remaining silent about the facts. Koch knew how to formulate the story of the revival in such a way that it was well accepted by the western reading public. The English translation of the book "God among the Zulus" appeared in 1979 and was translated into many languages.

The book "Revival among the Zulus" appeared under the name of Erlo Stegen. In this book he draws a line connecting the revival of Kwasizabantu to the church in the book of Acts, in order to prove how close the revival at Kwasizabantu resembles the early Christian church²². The propaganda machine started running smoothly. Stegen and his teams were invited to different countries in Europe for speaking engagements. With the help of his brother, Friedel, he organized conferences that were visited by thousands of people. In a number of European countries Kwasizabantu congregations and schools were started.

The Euro-choir was started for the European youth as a 'safety net' for the youth. Admission is only granted by the counselors, who closely observe them. Only those who strive for absolute purity and maintain the rule of strict separation of the sexes may become members.

The Kwasizabantu movement in Europe

Christians from different church affiliations who for years had searched for revival, were deeply impressed by Stegen's books, they joined the movement and became members of national Kwasizabantu congregations in their own country²³. During the service the preaching is the primary focus. Prayer meetings, discussion groups, Bible studies or cell groups are not tolerated. With the result that members seldom exchange thoughts.

Members and co-workers are willing to make great sacrifices. They maintain national centers

²⁰ STONE D, former congregation member of Claridge, interview on 2-07-2006; Lorentz Freese email d.d. 17-03-2004 to his brother in law Erwin Redinger concerning a warning sent to the address of Stegen concerning the punishment(beating) of his children.

²¹ XIMBA N, he worked as a Zulu-evangelist in Tugela Ferry, when on certain days an illiterate woman would come to him. She had a reference to a Bible text, bought a bible and went to Ximba and asked him to read the text. This occurrence is noted in 'God among the Zulus' (1990:36) and took place before the revival in 1966 (interview on 14-11-2004). See also the story of the possessed girl Malheni (Redinger E - comments on the two books of Ksb d.d. 9-11-2001).

²² STEGEN E, 1989. Revival among the Zulus, Loppersum: Kwasizabantu Mission, pg. 45-48.

²³ Kwasizabantu started centers in Germany, France, Switzerland, Netherlands and Belgium.

and offer conferences free of charge²⁴. Because they spend all their time on the activities for the movement, there is scarcely any time for critical thinking. Outsiders have a very high esteem of them for their generosity and dedication and regard them as very good Christians. The members ingratiate themselves with outsiders by means of 'love-bombing'²⁵, a tactic that is often used by sects. Eventually it proved to these unfortunate Europeans that they had projected their own longings and vision on Stegen's so called revival, without it ever delivering what they had hoped for.

How do the European followers see Erlo Stegen?

Erlo Stegen is their great intercessor and leader. He is the Moses who will lead them out of the 'Egypt' of sin and guide them to the Promised Land. They are sanctified by believing the Gospel, as it is explained by Stegen and to follow the way that he indicates.

To the ones who disagree with Stegen and leave him he says: "It is insane to leave revived Christians, it is absurd. If anyone says that God is leading me out, then the devil is his god. We want nothing to do with such a person"²⁶. The loyalty to the leader is such that the followers cannot bear hearing anything that differs from his. An attack on the leader(s) is seen as rebellion against God Himself. Georg Grau the leader in Germany places Stegen on a par with Moses, the prophets and the disciples²⁷.

Because Stegen superficially conforms to Christian theology, it is difficult for the believers in Europe to recognize the influence of the Zulu traditions on Stegen's movement. So much the more, because they understand these patterns to be the result of the revival, in strict compliance to God will.

Leadership

The Stegens exercise an authoritarian leadership that is strongly influenced by the Zulu traditions. They rule as king (*nkosi*) with Kwasizabantu as their tribe²⁸ and work with a non-elected hierarchical management structure as is typical in cults and sects. A mixture of spiritual and business motives is what drives them. In practice everything revolves around themselves. Besides their commercial enterprises at Kwasizabantu they have also developed business activities in Europe, supposedly to earn money for the mission.

Often church members in Europe and South Africa work voluntarily or at greatly reduced wages. At the moment the economic sector is an important source of income for the Stegens²⁹. They know of no financial transparency, they do not publish financial statements of their businesses or foundations.

The leaders have appointed a network of counselors, who keep in close contact with them. These counselors control the lives of the members. They give them compelling advice as to choice of a life partner, marriage, child rearing and work. In this way they influence the

²⁴ See the annual Kwasizabantu newsletters in the various countries.

²⁵ See the internet encyclopedia 'word iQ' http://www.wordiq.com/definition/Love_bombing.

²⁶ Kwasizabantu Family-conference in Melchtal, Switzerland, 10 august 2000.

²⁷ GRAU G, letter to the German leaders dated 29-01-1999: "It was a declaration of war against God".

²⁸ SUNDKLER BGM, 1961. Bantu prophets in South Africa, London: Oxford Un. Press, pg. 140-178.

²⁹ See the site of the mineral water producer aQuellé, is good for an annual profit of millions <http://www.aquelle.co.za/default.php>

member's whole life. Each member has his own counselor to whom he 'may' confess his sins. The counselor is busy with the past and the future of the believer: sins that have been committed must be confessed and prayers must be requested for future decisions. Because the counselor will not tolerate that someone is led by God without his intermediation. These believers come under mental monitoring without being aware of it. They totally become psychologically dependent on the counselor to time and again win his favor (and God's) so as to be certain that he is still on the right track. Members who want to become co-workers must regularly confess their sins. Confidential information, which can be of gain for the movement, must be passed onto the leaders. Because the preaching is aimed at the relationship with God and the committing of sin, the believers once again feel guilty and are constantly pressured to confess their sins. They annually attend conferences in Europe and a visit a counselor to repeatedly put their live 'in order with God'.

By self-examination the person is continually occupied with himself. Many go into a psychological crisis and continue to ask themselves the reason why God has not answered? Because they are constantly confronted that God only hears, intervenes or heals when all sins are confessed. In a number of cases this method has led to mental disturbances.

Is the revival continuing?

The leaders emphasize that the revival, since its inception in 1966, continues unabated and hold up the deception that Kwasizabantu is above reproach³⁰. Nothing is further from the truth: sins committed by Christians and non-believers also take place at Kwasizabantu, both by the leaders and by the members. The problem for the leaders is that in the pursuit of absolute purity and holiness, it remains for them unattainable. The leaders constant fear is, that members and outsiders will discover this and therefore sins are suppressed and hidden. They allow these questions to be hushed up and let these issues disappear and swept under the carpet, by invoking the sanctity of the confessional. Many affairs that were made public came from ex-members who had the courage to testify before the commission of the South African Evangelical Alliance. Others remain silent, even though they have left the movement. The fear that something will overcome them, continues to hold some of them in its grip for years. Whoever seeks to make these things public, is intimidated with threatening letters from Stegen's lawyers.

The white washing of sexual offences

Due to intervention into the private lives of married couples sexual offences have taken place in Stegen's movement. It is known that girls were forced to commit sexual acts with a counselor and afterwards were reviled as whores³¹. Another girl was raped by a boy belonging to the movement and then accused of being the guilty party. There is one known case of murder: the perpetrator regularly had sex with a young woman. When she indicated that she no longer wanted to continue, and intended to inform her counselor, he strangled her³². There was one incident that a white girl became pregnant by a Zulu man. She gave

³⁰ One of the witnesses, who appeared before jury of the Evangelical Alliance, said that Stegen assigned the co-workers to preach that the power of the revival was still the same as in the in the beginning, while although they knew this to be a basis of propaganda (23-04-2000).

³¹ Natal Witness 31-01-2000: Escape from the mission of fear. Sunday Tribune 06-02-2000: Mission of Malice. Testimony before the jury of the Evangelical Alliance (23-04-2000).

³² Natal Witness 12-08-2003: Man strangled victim after sex.

birth to her baby elsewhere and gave it up for adoption. In the course of time she returned to Kwasizabantu. Birth of babies to unwed mothers, as a rule it is the woman who is pointed out as the one who is guilty. When children are born as a result of extramarital sex it is the women who are accused.

The leaders continue to blame the women and the men are exonerated. The unfortunate victims are not believed. Whenever someone questions the leaders as to the conduct of these men, they are given this answer: “Why do you pose this question? Since God has forgiven the brother, it is dreadful that you do not forgive.”

The moral pressure regarding Kwasizabantu’s claim of purity and holiness is so great, that sexual transgressions are kept secret, as if they had never happened. Instead of punishing the guilty, the victims are accused and most of them are forced out of the movement.

Summary remarks

The revival at Kwasizabantu has left a trail of havoc and destruction: broken people, divorces, mental and physical abuse, beatings, virginity controls, financial scandals etc.

Since the publication of the report by the South African Evangelical Alliance about Kwasizabantu in the year 2000 little has changed. The leadership of Kwasizabantu systematically denied all the facts about the accusations against them and their abuse of power. Besides that, many hope that something will change including that criticism will be made public, so that possible offenders will be punished.

Furthermore it is desirable that not only former members, but also members at present understand that God’s grace and mercy do not depend on the explanation of the Bible or by the charisma of a prophetic leader. That purity and holiness cannot be obtained by confessing ones sins to a counselor. Spiritual care is not meant to obstruct people, but its aim is to free those who are bound. Biblical theology focuses on free(d) people, who take responsibility for themselves. In this context it is noticeable at Kwasizabantu that holiness is not a virtue one can earn, but it is Christ, and not a person, Who declares someone righteous. Here a theological judgment is necessary.

About the author

Albert Pilon has been doing research on Kwasizabantu since 2002. He has gathered information that stretches over a period of more than 40 years. This includes Kwasizabantu’s own publications, theological studies of Kwasizabantu done by third parties, letters, newspaper articles, documentation and new sources of material that became available in 2000. He also made a study of the (traditional) Zulu religion and in connection to that he examined the position of the African Independent Churches (AIC’s).

He has interviewed numerous former co-workers and members of Kwasizabantu in Europe and South Africa. During his field work in KwaZulu-Natal he met a number of Zulus and whites who had witnessed the start of Stegen’s revival. Because they were part of Stegen’s first co-workers, their statements were of immense value. To make an accurate assessment knowledge of the historical background of the movement has proved to be indispensable and the anthropological context of exceptional importance.