

2018-04

# Living memories: the legacy of my father and friend Samuel Mutendi

---

<https://hdl.handle.net/2144/51651>

*"Downloaded from OpenBU. Boston University's institutional repository."*

Living Memories:  
The Legacy of My Father and Friend Samuel Mutendi [1]  
By Marthinus Louis Daneel

Early in 1965, I started extensive field research on the African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Zimbabwe. I first had to drive into Zion City, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC) headquarters of Bishop Samuel Mutendi, situated at Mutarara in the Bikita district. I arrived unannounced and completely unknown to the bishop. Yet he was not the least bit disturbed by my unexpected arrival.

He was neatly clad and dignified, staff in hand, sitting to the side of his walled, domestic sanctuary where his large family of seventeen wives and seventy-something offspring lived. My first impression of him was that of a soft-spoken patriarch, good at listening sympathetically to his subjects, yet quick-witted and capable of adding humor to his handling of serious church matters and spiritual teachings. There was no question about his discipline and authority, judging by the honor and respect shown him by subordinate ZCC office-bearers in his presence. Despite his quiet demeanor, he struck me as a Rozvi *Mambo* (king) of great influence and wisdom.

Upon hearing my request to live for some months at Mutarara and study the ZCC, the bishop did not hesitate to grant it. We looked at each other with mutual candor and approval. This instinctive trust and respect marked our relationship from the first moment. The relationship proved to be decisive for the insights I gained on the ZCC, and for a cherished bond of friendship that lasted until his days on this earth were full.

Soon after settling at Zion City in 1965, I was invited by Bishop Mutendi to join his family as an “adopted” son. This was an unexpected but welcome opportunity for me that I duly accepted. Because I had grown up in a somewhat Calvinist Dutch Reformed context and was raised by dedicated missionary parents at Morgenster mission station—the main center of the church Mutendi originally belonged to—it was a bit of a jolt to be “inducted” into an African family belonging to a veritable church “patriarch.”

My adoption into the Mutendi family also had a decidedly public side attached to it. I shall not forget the Saturday morning when I parked my vehicle in front of Standard Bank in Masvingo town (then still called Fort Victoria). Unexpectedly the ZCC bus, packed full with members of my African family, came to a halt some fifty yards up the street. As the doors flew open, all the neatly uniformed Zionist mothers, together with their children, moved jubilantly down the street to greet me, the latest and slightly bewildered addition to the household.

They were singing and dancing, swaying and ululating. In a festive manner, they were “telling” the white-run town that they had adopted a *murungu* into their fold. Their message was quite clear: even in the face of the threatening war of attrition, Zion was prepared, publicly, to break down the barriers of racial prejudice and isolation. As the significance of this town event dawned on me, my arms and legs found the rhythm of dancing feet on the pavement.

I was struck by the bishop’s close involvement at home and in public with all his wives and children. He genuinely cared for them, patiently listened to their requests, and shared their concerns about the children. When there were conflicts between his co-wives he addressed the issues at stake, without hesitation. Because he believed disciplined behavior was an important hallmark of a Christian family, he insisted on regular Bible-study and prayer meetings for all his wives together.

### **Learning about ZCC Women**

I learned many things from three of the bishop’s prominent wives. Mai Tsungi taught me how a polygamous household in an extended Zionist family was arranged. Mai Joleka, the church’s lead dancer, gave advice on those tricky Zionist dance steps I never fully mastered, and Mai Solomon, the dedicated leader of the *Ruwadzano* (the ZCC Women’s Association) interpreted for me the testimony sermons of women on the healing experiences and the role of the “man of God” in their lives.

Mother Solomon invited me to attend some of their *Ruwadzano* meetings in the surrounding villages. The women’s sermons impressed me because of their evangelical content. Always aware of their own mandate and responsibility as messengers of the biblical good news, they made strong appeals for conversion, baptism, and spiritual growth. During witness sermons, they often mentioned the faith-healing service of the “man of God” at Moriah. Yet, their narratives were down-to-earth accounts of Bishop Mutendi and the teams of prophetic healers living at the ZCC “*hospitara*” (hospital) who laid prayerful hands on their heads and gave them holy water to drink for healing purposes or to bring the birth of children.

They were not just propagating a kind of guaranteed success story. In some public testimonies, barren women openly spoke about their anguish at God not granting them children despite the intercession of their church leader. Invariably, they added that God enabled them to overcome their disappointment about barrenness by accepting additional ministries in Zion such as attending to the sick and suffering in needy families, or acting as teachers and evangelistic

preachers in the church's outreach programs. Other women who had suffered from their husbands' aggression, including physical assaults, witnessed about Bishop Mutendi's steady influence that brought stability, peace, and mutual respect back into their spousal relations.

## Sacrament and Outreach of the Church

The rapid and sustained growth of the ZCC in Rhodesia (and subsequently in Zimbabwe), was not merely the result of Pentecostal-type faith-healing activities or miracles. For Bishop Mutendi, the growth of the church was dependent on the mystical link between Christ's body and the body of living believers in the sacrament of Holy Communion. In practice, this meant that the annual three to four major *Paseka* (Paschal) events that drew hundreds of thousands of ZCC members to Zion City were preparations for the extensive "missionary campaigns" countrywide and beyond that followed the Eucharistic event.

By developing the "sacrament of union" between Christ and His followers as a regular springboard for massive outreach campaigns, the bishop mobilized virtually his entire church as a missionary movement. The bishop, of course, did not appreciate the use, and in some respects misuse, of the term "mission" by foreigners. He therefore introduced his own favorite terms, e.g. *kufamba*: literally "to walk on patrol" (a reminder of his service earlier in life, as a policeman); *kufamba rwendo*: "to go campaigning"; *kundomutsa vatezvo*: "to go and uplift or inspire the church members."

To prepare the Eucharist, the bishop often preached on Christ's classic mission command in Matthew 28:19 ff. He emphasized the centrality of Jesus Christ as the foundation of the church and the church's expansion in the world as the manifestation of God's emergent kingdom. Mutendi never tried to portray himself as an African Messiah or the Savior figure of his people. On the contrary, he warned his followers against such beliefs. As we were in the midst of the *Chimurenga* liberation struggle he did, however, assure his followers that the struggle itself was a sign of God's emergent justice in Africa. He urged his followers who were out campaigning, converting, and baptizing people, not to fear and sit down as cowards when they saw white people approaching, but to retain their composure with dignity and courage, whatever the nature of the interracial encounters.

The campaigning teams were carefully composed of senior church officers that included a minister, senior evangelists, preachers, *Ruwadzano* women, and several youth members who were being trained to do ZCC campaigning. A full campaign usually lasted two to four weeks and members

traveled by bus, bicycle or on foot, depending on the distance. This model of outreach showed that my African father had created an inculturated church that required all its members to take responsibility for its mission and growth.

### **A Man of all Seasons**

Bishop Mutendi was particularly proud of his descent from the royal Rozvi clan. He traced his lineage all the way back to the famous Rozvi King (*Mambo*) Dlembewu Dombo, who is said to have founded a stable Shona dynasty; his successive rulers, such as Chirisamuru, the protector, Rupandamananga, and Mutinhima; and then a number of Rozvi chiefs; Ngwerengwezhe, Gumunyu and Zihumbga Jiri, in whose chiefdom in Bikita the bishop's Zion City was situated.

At a time when all Africans suffered from some form of colonial oppression, Bishop Mutendi addressed their need for liberation by building a holy city that was relatively free from white colonial intervention, under the authority of the Christian God. Mutendi's wide ranging influence was reminiscent of the far-flung rule of the dynastic Rozvi kings in the pre-colonial past. Unlike the fierce Ndebele invaders, the Rozvi *Mambos* were remembered and respected as Shona rulers.

As the "man of God" at Zion City gained prominence as a veritable Rozvi "king" in the midst of a colonially oppressed people, his followers formed great expectations for a new liberation. At the onset of the *Chimurenga* struggle in 1965, Shona chiefs, including many Rozvi chiefs and their elders in desperate need of socio-political change converged on Mutendi's church. Bishop Mutendi also maintained close contact with chiefs who were longstanding members of his church. They came to Zion City to consult and pray with their leader about the looming war. He also sent out prophets and prophetesses to outlying chiefdoms to advise affiliated chiefs or ward-headmen on political matters.

### **A Passion for Education**

During the *Chimurenga* years, Mutendi became known as a courageous leader who persistently resisted the colonial administration. He also negotiated with colonial officials and confronted them on issues concerning the growth of the ZCC. Despite his tranquil demeanor, he was utterly fearless and relentless when he introduced church projects that were beneficial for his people. He fought for the ZCC to have autonomous administration of their schools so they could control the religious instruction and choose their own schoolteachers, just like the foreign mission churches in Rhodesia.

Mutendi's passion for the educational progress of his people caused him to follow the example of the Dutch Reformed Church, the educational powerhouse in the region that ran 600 rural schools among the Shona. His first attempts, however, did not meet government standards when it came to school buildings, teacher qualifications, or prescribed curricula. As a result, government disapproval led to repeated clashes and imprisonment for Mutendi due to his stubborn refusal to withdraw from educational engagement. Later however, he secured permission for the ZCC schools by allowing the Dutch Reformed Church to be in charge of their oversight.

### **A New Understanding of AIC Leadership**

My breakfast meetings with Bishop Mutendi helped me to understand important issues related to the origins and growth of the ZCC. In particular, I needed to understand the question of AIC leaders as Black Messiahs. Bengt Sundkler, in his ground-breaking study on the AICs entitled *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, had singled out church leaders such as Isaiah Shembe and Engenas Lekganyane (founder of the ZCC in South Africa), as providers of salvation to their followers at the gates of heaven.[2] This interpretation led to radical criticism, in AIC literature, of so-called African Messianic leadership because it appeared to distort the uniqueness of Christ's biblical role as Savior.

Bishop Mutendi explained to me that, as a ZCC leader, he served in a heavenly "gate-keeping" function in the afterlife. But this meant that he would only act as a kind of *munyai*—that is, a messenger or go-between—who introduced his deceased ZCC members to God at the heavenly portals. He emphasized that this role in no way threatened the uniqueness of Christ as Savior. The judgment of individuals and their eternal salvation or damnation, he said, was entirely in the hands of God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. The "man of God" consistently warned his followers not to equate him with the biblical Christ figure.

I communicated these insights to Sundkler. As a result, he admitted that his original interpretation of the so-called Bantu Messiahs was too radical to be generalized to the rich diversity of AICs. He indicated in his follow-up book, *Zulu Zion and Some Swazi Zionists*, that the Bantu Messiahs were not replacing the Biblical Christ or attempting to lead their followers back to pagan practices. Instead, they were *iconic leaders* who genuinely tried to mirror the life and salvation of the Biblical Christ to their followers.

Sundkler's changed views and my own publications on the Shona contributed to a noticeable swing towards a much more positive evaluation of the

AICs in subsequent literature and in ecumenical interaction between the churches of Southern Africa.

## **A Time of Political Unrest**

Towards the end of my stay at Zion City in 1965, the storm clouds of war and political unrest were gathering, putting the future of the entire settlement in jeopardy. The District Commissioner of Bikita was planning to change the boundary line between the Rozvi and Duma chiefdoms, a move that would place the entire ZCC settlement under the jurisdiction of the Duma instead of the Rozvi chief. The consensus was that the colonial government had deliberately planned to rein in Mutendi's initiatives or else to push him out of Masvingo Province.

To protest this action, Mutendi's sons and fellow Zionist villagers staged a peaceful public demonstration. Subsequently, the demonstrators were summoned to appear in the Bikita district court for a public hearing. All the leaders of the demonstration, including some of Mutendi's sons, received brief prison sentences. Fortunately, I managed to bail out the entire group immediately after the trial.

Mutendi, however, in a final act of defiance, publicly tried to save his "city" by challenging the ruling of the colonial authorities on the boundary issue in court. Unfortunately, he suffered a crushing defeat and lost the treasured City of Zion, including the recently completed modern school. The bishop and his people headed some 500 miles north, to the northernmost region of Gokwe district, to settle there and build a new life. Mutendi, now in his mid-seventies, did not waste time grieving over his loss but led the exodus to the north like Moses of old. They soon constructed a second Zion City, surrounded by newly allotted Zionist farms where fertile soils, near the Chirisa Game Reserve, allowed the settlers to grow bumper crops of cotton in the new Rozvi chiefdom and sub-chiefdoms adjacent to Chiefs Chireya's and Sahi's territories.

On the issue of education, the situation in Gokwe was quite different from Bikita. District Commissioner Roy Wyatt proved to be supportive of new educational and farming schemes that could benefit the local African population. He therefore encouraged Bishop Mutendi, whom he trusted, to build new schools and to introduce anti-soil-erosion farming methods in spite of the escalating *Chimurenga* war effort.

In 1972, I returned from Holland to lay the groundwork for an ecumenical movement of AICs in Zimbabwe. The Zionist "homecoming" in Gokwe had special meaning for me because I had realized the profound impact

the three years of living among the AICs and my “adoption” into Mutendi’s family had had on my life. After graduation, I had refused the offer of an endowed chair as professor at the Free University of Amsterdam because I knew that I had to be in Africa in full-time service to the AIC’s.

In the 1970s, I was building *Fambidzano* (Union of African Churches), overseeing its theological education program for AICs, and negotiating associate membership for the new movement in the Rhodesia Christian Conference, the precursor of the Zimbabwean National Council of the World Council of Churches. In that position, I was able to help the District Commissioner in Gokwe to resolve local game problems but also to visit my Zionist family relatively often.

At that time in Zimbabwe, there was an escalation of the *Chimurenga* struggle, especially in the country’s border areas. Gokwe was eventually declared a war-zone. The Rhodesia Light Infantry (R.L.I.), Rhodesia African Rifles (R.A.R.), and the South African Police (S.A.P.), all patrolled the region and engaged the “boys of the bush” (*vakomana hwesango*), as the freedom fighters were called. In Zion City, secrecy about feeding the bush-fighters was of the essence. Nevertheless, my father-friend during private discussions filled me in on the responsibilities his ZCC prophets and healers shared in tending to the wounded freedom fighters, as church members moved them around to safe places, such as caves and dense thickets, in order to prevent their detection by the Rhodesian forces.

In all these activities, the “man of God” emerged as a freedom fighter in his own right in three particular areas. He presented his people with religious freedom, that is, the opportunity to join an African controlled church, free from white missionary tutelage, from European culture, theology, and Bible interpretation. He provided educational freedom in the form of opportunities at Zionist schools where Zionist teachings could replace the Reformed, Catholic or other catechisms taught in mission schools. And finally, the Rozvi-Duma boundary dispute was a step towards African political freedom and wider support of the *Chimurenga* struggle. This became evident when the ZCC offered prophetic healing services for wounded guerilla fighters once the Defe ZCC headquarters in northern Gokwe had been established.

Bishop Mutendi’s courageous leadership in the face of adversity and danger challenged me to stand firm when it really mattered in war-torn Rhodesia. During the mid-seventies, while the *Chimurenga* struggle was exacting its toll, I was summoned by the regional military tribunal of Masvingo Province to appear at Colonel Hartley’s farm near Masvingo town, to justify my refusal of conscription in the Rhodesian military forces. When I explained my research and

why I refused to take up arms against my fellow black Zimbabweans, the officers accused me of being a “traitor to the white cause in Africa.” They threatened to punish me with a lengthy prison term in the infamous Chikurubi jail in Harare. The threat reminded me of my adoptive African father’s repeated spells in prison, and I found the peace of mind to say in my final statement: “If jail is the only option, so be it. My task is to promote reconciliation between all the races of Zimbabwe, instead of fighting for white supremacy in Southern Africa.” Afterwards, though no action was taken, the threat of military retaliation continued to hang like a dark cloud over me until the new state of Zimbabwe emerged.

### **The Legacy of Samuel Mutendi**

As a youngster, Isaiah 58 was given to me by my mother as part of a birthday present. The prophet Isaiah preached that the fasting required by God is “the removal of the chains of oppression and the yoke of injustice, which allows the oppressed to go free.” (Is. 58:6). God proclaimed:

If you put an end to oppression (...) If you give food to the hungry and satisfy those in need, then the darkness around you will turn to the brightness of noon. And I will always guide you and satisfy you with good things. I will keep you strong and well. You will be like a garden that has plenty of water, like a spring of water that never goes dry. (Is. 58:9-11)

As I read these texts in the starkly racist and oppressive context of Southern Africa, the challenge of Isaiah 58 became a kind of *leitmotiv* in my life. As a result, I put a full-time academic career on hold as I became, for a time, a freelance “missioner” among the AICs. In this ministry, I had to oppose the colonial, racist walls of partition more deliberately than I had earlier in my life.

My African father and friend fearlessly addressed the impact of colonial oppression in his sermons and adjusted the structure of his church to accommodate the needs of the sick, the hungry, and the poor. He thus responded more forcefully and consistently to Isaiah’s prophetic challenge than I observed elsewhere in Zimbabwean AIC circles. As a Rozvi “warrior,” he was passionately engaged in the provision and control of Zionist schools, and the struggle cost him repeated imprisonments. But this was how he taught his people to walk tall with courage and pride, whatever the consequences.

On Sundays, the entire church community at Zion City “high-stepped” purposefully and publicly in marches and dances. Bishop Mutendi, as leader of his uniformed family band, appeared in a neatly pressed navy-blue suit with

braided gold around the arms, resembling the adornments of a marine-admiral. With deft movements of his holy staff, he conducted the march-beat of his band. The modern instruments glittered in the sun (base-drums, snare-drums, tubas, trumpets, bugles, trombones), and the loud drumbeats sounded like a call to arms in a military parade. The real intent of those Sunday marches was to express life and peace by replicating God's Jerusalem in Africa, where the new heaven and new earth meet.

For Zionists, the language of dancing feet was a form of protest against the colonial authorities, a way to disassociate from their unfair laws. To pound the earth with heavy boots and shoes was symbolic, a sure sign that followers and leaders were united and fully embraced the cause of liberation from oppression by casting off the shackles of injustice in a lively dance performed with abandon.

### **The New Jerusalem and the “Brightness of Noon”**

Bishop Mutendi was deeply aware of the plight of his followers when crops failed. Over many years, he developed a massive food security strategy orchestrated at the ZCC headquarters to feed thousands of needy families during periods of agricultural crisis caused by droughts, floods, and crop raiding. The lives saved and the relief derived from reliable food-aid schemes were ways to turn “the darkness into the brightness of noon.” Here the witness of the “man of God” was at stake along with the commitment of thousands of ZCC farmers who followed his example by tithing part of their crop yields to the church, for food distribution among the needy.

### **Comfort for Vulnerable Women**

Another example of the “brightness of noon” was the way Mutendi's Zion City helped barren women suspected of witchcraft and of destroying or “eating the fruit of their own wombs.” When there was a family history of barrenness, suspicions of witchcraft were particularly heavy and social judgement could be swift and merciless. Suspected barren women were often abused by their spouses and in-laws, and ostracized from the community. In the most extreme cases, the burning of the departing “witch's” huts and a pronouncement of the death penalty (whether executed or not), showed the severity of public disapproval of the evil of witchcraft.

Bishop Mutendi spent countless counselling sessions with young women seeking the gift of *chibereko* (literally “fruit” of the womb) and realized how vulnerable they were to witchcraft accusations in their home villages if they

did not bear children. In response, he developed long-term housing facilities at Zion City to serve as a safe haven for individuals needing extensive prophetic counselling and faith-healing treatment. Thus, a large complex of “*hospitara*” (hospital) huts were built where barren women of all ages and other patients could find sympathetic treatment along with protection against rumor-mongering and threatening witch-finders.

By providing a long-term sanctuary for women who remained barren in spite of repeated intercession and the symbolic touch of his holy staff, the bishop was publicly admitting that he could not guarantee any healing miracles because he was only a servant of the Lord. The testimonies of many women at church headquarters—those with and those without children—attested to the truth that the ultimate decision regarding procreation belonged to Jesus Christ, in whose service their caring leader operated. Publicly, the bishop never pretended that his faith-healing efforts would always succeed. Therefore, he was committed to providing long-term care for barren women, despite criticism. This showed his mature spirituality and divinely inspired wisdom.

The housing also enabled barren women to settle for extended periods or permanently in a Zionist community where their husbands could live with them periodically while they battled their disappointment. They experienced deliverance largely from living peacefully, shielded from accusations of witchcraft by understanding prophetic healers and fellow patients. If barren women confessed that they were receiving call-dreams from matrilineal ancestral spirits who had practiced witchcraft while they were alive, the prophets prescribed cleansing exorcistic ceremonies until they were satisfied that the tempting “demons” were fully expelled by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In addition, prolonged stays at Zion City not only enabled barren women to come to terms with the hurt and the social implications of their barrenness, it also gave them opportunities to develop their talents for meaningful service in church and society. The oppressive darkness of false accusations that caused the despised “witch” to experience anger, fear, and despair gave way to the brightness of noon, to a new story in which she could experience joy, faith celebration, mutual trust, care-giving, love, and respect.

The opportunities in Zion for recovering patients included farming activities, such as ploughing the lands, planting new crops, weeding, protecting crops against raiding baboons and flocks of birds, harvesting, and storing the grain in granaries. The labor itself was part of the patients’ physical recovery, and food gathering was a stabilizing therapy towards regaining individual independence. Consequently, the bishop allowed the residents at his *hospitara* to till large sections of arable land for the duration of their stay.

Long-term female residents with fertility issues were encouraged to attend religious activities regularly. Those gifted in Bible knowledge and interpretation contributed towards Bible study and discussions during the weekly *Ruwadzano* (Women's Association) meetings, where some of Bishop Mutendi's wives played leading roles. The diligent women with energetic dispositions were appointed as assistants to the senior *Ruwadzano* women who conducted house visitations in the surrounding villages to assist elderly or sick people with their domestic chores (house cleaning, clothes washing, food preparation). Such basic domestic services often included Bible reading, spiritual exhortations, and dancing to the beat of popular Zionist songs. These caregiving visits in the village context with experienced *Ruwadzano* leaders, were deeply inspiring "crash courses" in Zionist pastoral care for caregivers-in-training.

The girls or women passing through Zion City in search of cures or psychological support also had other opportunities for community participation. Novices already experiencing visions, call-dreams or speaking-in-tongues, for instance, could learn from ZCC prophets and healers who spent days and nights up in the holy mountains where they received instruction, spent hours in secluded prayer, and fasted. This interaction with experienced prophets and healers often helped the learners to make such progress that they soon qualified to become responsible "workers of the Holy Spirit" in the church and could communicate reliable revelations of the Spirit to offer guidance to people facing issues in their lives.

Bishop Mutendi's care for beleaguered women who were traumatized and feared for their lives and his provision for their safety inside of the holy city were indeed cause for the light of noon to overpower and replace the darkness of injustice.

### **Mutendi's Last Days**

Shortly before his death at Defe in 1976, I visited my father-friend for the last time. Together we sat in the winter-sun basking in its warmth on the porch of one of the numerous newly built houses of Zion. We did not need to engage in absorbing conversation as we were simply enjoying each other's presence. Samuel, the prophet-bishop, must have been in his late eighties then. He was frail and spent from all the "battles" he had endured as a Rozvi warrior, yet still quietly upright and dignified as a Rozvi "monarch." He still had a twinkle in his eyes, especially during church services, while he watched his youngest children attempting to dance to the rhythmic beat of the tip of his holy staff.

Bishop Mutendi was buried at his second Zion City in Gokwe. Thousands of ZCC members from all over Zimbabwe congregate there annually, around the date of his death to commemorate their founder leader, to derive new inspiration from sermon narratives on outstanding features of his rich life, and to plan together the future strategies of evangelistic outreach and church expansion.

**Note:**

1. This testimony combined and abridged the content of two texts:

Daneel, M. L. “Bishop Samuel Mutendi: Memories of my Father and Friend.” *Dopota Star*, September 2013.

Daneel, M. L. “A Letter to Bishop Nehemiah Mutendi, with Personal Recollections of Bishop Samuel Mutendi, and Defense of his Integrity as a Man of God.” Unpublished. April 18, 2017.

2. Alternate spelling of Engenas is Enginasi.

-----