


The holy waters of En Four: Rituals, prayers, magic and mysticism

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Travellers on the N4 highway just east of Pretoria can see evidence of a sacred spring next to the road with pilgrims moving around the landscape and collecting water. This research explored this place – called 'En Four' by some – and described visits and conversations had at the site in 2024. The first part of the research narrated the encounters and recorded the local and anecdotal knowledge shared by pilgrims and visitors. The research then analysed the religious significance of the water-based rituals using Rodney Stark's religion-sociological theory of religion: it identified evidence of magic, prayer, ritual and mysticism. Finally, a number of findings considered the use, value and care of water at this religious site: En Four offers various religious experiences, contributes to mental and physical health and may enhance social cohesion and understanding.

Contribution: This research recorded an important, but still undocumented, religious site, as well as the activities and rituals enacted at this place. It interpreted the African water-rituals uniquely from a religion-sociological perspective, also indicating its significance for both individuals and society. This contributed to an interreligious dialogue on, and reappreciation of water as being holy and transformative.

Keywords: water; magic; rituals; prayer; mysticism; Zion Christian Church; African Independent Churches; African Traditional Religion(s); sociology of religion.

Introduction

Travelling on the N4 highway from Pretoria (Tshwane) to Mpumalanga and the Lowveld, I have often seen cars parked on the side of the highway and little groups of people carrying containers with water down the hill (Figure 1). I guessed that there was some kind of sacred water source but knew nothing more. Curious, I tried to find out what exactly was happening at this place. A Google search revealed nothing except the speculation (and a satellite photo) of fellow inquisitive travellers.

'Rubber Band Gun Smuggler' (2021:1) asked on Reddit:¹

WTF is up with this spot on the N4 between Pta and Cullinan? I always see a bunch of guys parked here next to the road, carrying various containers of water down (up?) the mountain there. What the hell is up with it? Anyone know any details?

Some of the responses were: 'I've seen them for years too and always wondered!!' (Cccrazycatlady 2021:1), 'I also wondered that!' (RockerKEI 2021:1). Most contributors guessed it had to do with religion and healing: 'Natural spring there, people stop to collect water, it's a religious thing and the water is believed to have healing properties' (Captainminx 2021:1) and 'I've been told that it is for religious reasons. There is a natural spring there' (Trashcanman2000 2021:1). Djvanderberg went one step further: 'Yeah natural spring with holy water. I always wondered and actually stopped there one day and asked a gentleman what's up' (Djvanderberg 2021:1).

In this research, I will try to both answer these questions and interpret the activities. I start by narrating my journey to this site, in order to describe and record what I found. I report my observations and relate anecdotes and customs on what takes place. I then analyse my account from a religion-sociological perspective,² finally summarising a number of findings.

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1. https://www.reddit.com/r/southafrica/comments/t38deo/comment/hyymmis/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web3x&utm_name=web3xcss&utm_term=1&utm_content=share_button.

2. This research describes the magic, prayers, rituals and mysticism which occur at En Four using a religion-sociological theory and offers no judgement of these.

Note: Special Collection: Interreligious Dialogue.

En Four³

Arriving at the site

I contacted the research department at Freedom Park in Pretoria (that collects and archives African heritage), enquiring whether they had conducted any research on this place or were aware of it. I received a friendly reply from a researcher, who expressed interest, but ‘... unfortunately [*had*] no information on this area and its significance in terms of religious rituals ...’ (Mrs Lauren Marx, pers. comm., 13 May 2024).

Seeing no other option, I enlisted the help of a translator, and on 14 May 2024, the two of us set out to visit and explore this intriguing place. I was not sure what reception we would get and whether we would even be allowed to visit. Consequently, I first drove past the site so that she could assess our safety ... but she felt comfortable!

We stopped among a handful of cars and were politely welcomed. While most other visitors went about their business, carrying containers of water up and down the hill, others were keen to guide us. We were also invited to explore this special place. We learnt that this site – introduced as ‘En Four’ (being next to the N4 highway) – was a sacred spring and that its water could turn ‘bad luck’ into ‘good luck’, which could mean good health, restored fertility, employment or wealth and beautiful cars.

I was struck by the number of vehicles that kept coming and going. Some visitors would simply collect sacred water and depart, but others lingered longer and it turned out, a few even stayed at the spring for a week or so. During my second visit on 02 August 2024, a minibus taxi arrived, ferrying passengers to and fro.

The visitors to En Four represented many Christian denominations and followers of other faiths as well.⁴ I met members of both the St Engenas- and mainline Zion Christian Church (ZCC), as well as a Roman Catholic and a group of people from the St John’s Apostolic Faith Mission – an African Independent Church (AIC) – and I also met a *sangoma*, a traditional healer from African Traditional Religion(s) (ATR). Some knew this place as ‘Sediba’,⁵ while others simply referred to a special or holy place.

The notion that diverse visitors were tolerated and accepted, also struck me in the way in which I was welcomed and encouraged to use the holy waters. No one questioned my being there, and when I introduced myself as a Christian pastor during my first visit, I was encouraged to drink some of the holy water as it would enhance my spiritual strength and leadership. It was apparently important for ‘bishops’ to regularly use these waters. A similar invitation was extended on my second visit.

3.The first name I learnt of the site as described below.

4.Lebeloane and Madise (2006:143–144) say that water is used in many mainline churches, AICs and Charismatic Churches, as water is regarded as sacred and as a source of power in the apostolic traditions.

5.*Sediba* means ‘fountain’ or ‘wellspring’ in the Sesotho language (Müller 2011:66).



Source: Photograph taken by the author, A.M. Meiring on 02 August 2024 near Donkerhoek, Pretoria

FIGURE 1: View from the top of the hill.



Source: Photograph taken by the author, A.M. Meiring on 02 August 2024 near Donkerhoek, Pretoria

FIGURE 2: The spring and water pool.

At my latter visit, I learned a bit more about En Four: not only was the spring believed to produce holy water, but the whole hill was considered to be a holy place. After collecting water from the spring’s pool, visitors would carry the water up the hill to use in different rituals in this sacred place. This explained the many remains of small fires and disposed bottles that were used in rituals. I also witnessed quite a few small groups of people wandering up and down the hill, praying. It seems that while some visitors only came to collect holy water to be used at home or in church, others lingered to make use of the holiness of the hill.

The spring and water pool

I was very curious to see the actual spring. A short path, no more than 100 m, led from the parking area to a smallish pool of water as viewed in Figure 2. This was the place where people would fill their containers and it was clearly well-used. While we first visited, at least



Source: Photograph taken by the author, A.M. Meiring on 02 August 2024 near Donkerhoek, Pretoria

FIGURE 3: Visitors climbing up the hill.

three or four groups of people arrived, filled their containers and left again. It was said that there was an underground spring that fed this pool and anecdotal accounts added that you could sometimes see a kind of movement or stirring in the water; it seemed that the sand in the pool swirled around at times.

There were stones at the bottom of the pool that could be used to cross the pool or lean on while filling containers. There were also a few shining coins inside the pool – presumably South African two- and five-rand coins. The immediate surrounding was clearly well-used. There were many paths and footprints in the mud around the pool and a few discarded containers.

Prayers at the pool

It seems that the pool itself was the location for a number of rituals. Some visitors would stay at the pool, praying, for a week at a time, while others sat praying next to it when I visited. The longer-term visitors would customarily spend their days all around the hill, but then at night they would sit next to the pool and pray to connect to their ancestors. For them, the pool was a special doorway to communicate with the spiritual realm.

I also met a sangoma praying quietly next to the pool. He wore a segmented reed necklace around his neck and was using this as a prayer aid (similar to prayer beads). Another ritual explained the presence of the coins in the water: visitors to the pool would take out coins and then speak to these coins – conveying or attaching messages to them. When they then deposited the coins into the pool, they believed that these coins could pass on the messages to the ancestors.

Cleansing on the hill

The hill behind the pool was the scene for many rituals connected to the holy water. Visitors would draw holy water and then carry it up the hill to perform various rituals. The most common of these involved washing with the water to cleanse oneself of disease or bad luck. The water could also be used as steam: they would heat a rock in a fire and then

place the hot rock in a water container to produce steam. This steaming is believed to heal afflictions.

A local anecdote related a more occult ritual that took place on the hill. A person who was cursed by another, would fill a bottle of water in the pool and then continue up the hill. There they would add an iron nail to the bottle and carefully drink the water. This would release the person of the curse and return it to the sender; they called it 'reversing' it. Breaking an egg on one of the hilltop stones, and letting the contents drip to the ground could also expel bad luck.

We observed groups of people heading up the hill all the time. Some carried their containers high up the hills and many were colourfully dressed in religious attire. One group was lighting candles on a rocky outcrop not too far from the pool. The further we continued up the pool, the less inclined visitors were to speak to us. We picked up that the hill was a place reserved for rituals and not for idle conversation.

At the bottom of the hill, we met the owner of the minibus taxi who was also washing his taxi with the same holy water. By washing his taxi, he not only cleaned his vehicle but also added the protection of the special water on it.

Bottled holy

The vast majority of visitors simply collected water to be used at home. They either washed themselves in the water, or they drank it to obtain its special powers. While some collected bottles of water for washing whenever they passed the spot, others dispensed these waters to heal friends and family members who were sick. Local legend claimed that administering this water to long overdue pregnant women would produce immediate results. This water, it was believed, was so powerful that it could even be used without prayer. When they called the water very 'clean', it referred to this holy quality rather than its clarity.

Still, the bottled water had other uses as well. Prophets, it was said, would drink vast amounts of this water to induce vomiting, and that the vomiting would produce or sustain prophetic messages.

Interpreting the En Four activities

Rodney Stark presented a (revised) rational choice theory of religion (1999:265–289) to explain religion from a sociological perspective. This theory develops a number of axioms from the notion that human behaviour is shaped by rewards and costs, and the most valuable and lasting rewards call for religious compensators. Stark then explains the core elements of religion to answer to this theory (Kunin 2003:84–86). Doing so, he developed useful definitions⁶ for magic, ritual, prayer and mysticism

6. I do not attempt to critique his propositions, as this has been done – and answered – elsewhere. I do make use of his insights which is widely considered to be a valid sociological approach to religion (Kunin 2003:84–86; Schmidt 1988:351–352).

which I will use to interpret the rituals and use of water at En Four.

Magic

Stark distinguished between magic and religion, saying that while both are based on supernatural assumptions, religion deals primarily with the gods, and that magic is limited to impersonal conceptions of the supernatural. He defines magic as ‘... all efforts to manipulate supernatural forces to gain rewards (or avoid costs) without reference to a god or gods’ (1999:281). He further characterises magic as instances where such impersonal supernatural forces (sometimes called ‘mana’) are believed to be the inherent properties of particular objects or words, such as the belief that supernatural forces in a crystal can magically heal a cold without reference to a god. In addition, magic may involve supernatural forces ‘... a bit more animate than mana ...’ when a magician attempts to compel spiritual entities to perform a service or harm someone. In this case the act of ‘compelling’ identifies it as magic; the magician mechanically compels the supernatural, rather than to ‘exchange’.⁷ Finally, magic can only provide short-term worldly rewards.

The belief that the water of En Four possess its own special powers qualifies it as a magical⁸ understanding of the spring. Interestingly, the ZCC distinguishes different types of water that should be used in rituals, among them *sediba*⁹ water that comes from a fountain or spring (water that comes from underneath the soil), ‘moving water’ or *meetsi ya noka*¹⁰ from a river or a stream and *makopane* water that is collected from a place where two streams converge (Müller 2011: 66, 73, 86). This is powerful *sediba* water.¹¹

When visitors to En Four collect water to either wash with or drink, they rely on the magical properties of the water. Visitors often speak of the water changing their ‘bad luck’ to ‘good luck’. It would seem that luck functions as an impersonal power that can be transformed through the power of the water. Similarly, the powerful water is believed to cure illnesses¹² and in particular, more complicated conditions like infertility or delayed labour. When washing his taxi with this water in order to cover the vehicle with protection, the driver relies on the magical power of the water. Likewise, it is the supernatural power of the water (and the accompanying ritual) that seem to reverse curses.

7. ‘Exchange’ is a key concept in Stark. He proposes that humans will seek to exchange objective religious commitment (e.g. offerings, obedience) and subjective religious commitments (e.g. belief and emotions) with a god or gods in pursuit of rewards (1999:270, 280).

8. Some scholars have argued to replace the word ‘magic’ with dynamism in order to emphasise the supernatural agency involved, yet I consider and use Stark’s definition to acknowledge this agency (Parrinder 1954, 26; Smart 1969:74–75).

9. *Sediba*, noted above, means ‘fountain’ or ‘wellspring’ in the Sesotho language.

10. *Meetsi ya noka* means ‘river from the water’ (Müller 2011:86).

11. Lebeloane and Madise (2006) found similar categories of water: spring water (*metse a motswedil*), fountain water or noisy water (*metse a leshata*), flowing or river water (*metse a noka e e elelang*) and sea water (*metse a lewatle*).

12. Of course, a case can also be made for these practices to relying on miracles, rather than magic. While the results of magic are mechanical and certain, miracles may or may not happen depending on the will of the deity (Stark 1999:284). ‘Magic commands, religion implores’, says Parrinder (1954:113).

The Zionists’ magical use of water is attested by many researchers and anthropologists. Hanekom (1975:99) described, for example, how bottles of water were charged with the spirit (*moya*) of prophets and used to cure afflictions. Lebeloane and Madise (2006:146) reported that ministers or traditional healers could bestow life-giving power upon water. Müller added that this water could also be worn underneath clothes or placed under pillows to ensure good dreams. Magical water could be sprayed on a house for protection or added to a field to aid harvests (2011:97, 105). In his study on AIC healing practices, West found that 79% of these involved water, either by drinking, washing, steaming or as enemas and emetic (1975:107–108). James Mashabela describes Zionists warding off curses by pouring out water in exactly the same way as the En Four anecdote directed (2017:7).

Religious rituals

Next, Stark continues, religious rituals are collective ceremonies; they are formal, and mostly follow a formal pattern. Religious rituals are focussed on god or the gods and share a common mood (1999:283).

I witnessed no formal rituals while visiting En Four, but some ritual qualities could be observed in the groups of people moving around. When groups of people went up the hill to wash themselves together or sat in a small group lighting candles,¹³ it suggested collective ceremonies. One group of women donned the bright yellow¹⁴ scarves and blankets of St John’s Apostolic Mission before taking the trail up the hill that colourfully hinted at an unobserved ritual as viewed in Figure 3.

Similarly, Müller (2011:106) recorded how water was used in rituals such as initiation, or when receiving a ritual blessing. West (1975:95) described AIC baptism and purification rites using sacred water. In these rituals, the water both washes away the congregations’ sins and in doing so manifests membership and community (Hanekom 1975:98). At such occasions, congregants may be given a new, special identity in the church, attested to by new clothes, badges and uniforms (Mashabela 2017:4).

Sundkler posits a sacred pool at the centre of Zionist collective rituals ‘ – the (local) Bethesda or the Jordan’ – where new members were purified and initiated into the churches. Interestingly, the water pool was simultaneously seen as an extremely dangerous place where snakes, monsters and devils lurked. But by following the proper rituals, congregants could defeat these together and ritually overcome dark and dangerous forces (1961:203–205).

Prayer

Prayer, according to Stark, is a communication addressed to a god or gods. It comes in many forms, silent or loud,

13. According to West (1975:94), candles (as well as sticks) can be used by AICs to establish sacred spaces.

14. Yellow coloured clothes may symbolise the indwelling or expectation of the Holy Spirit (West 1975:100).

regulated or spontaneous, private or collective; it can express praise, need or despair. 'But, in all cases, prayers are meant to be *heard*' (1999:283). Thus, prayer builds a personal tie with a god or gods; it shares a relationship. It is through prayer that people can experience their gods as loving and caring.

En Four was clearly a special place for praying. Small groups of people wandered around the pool in silent prayer. Many pilgrims visited the spring primarily to pray. Even after a visitor's fortunes had already changed and their good luck restored, they would continue praying in order to deepen their relationship with God and their ancestors, rather than pleading for some sort of divine intervention. In addition, when using prayer beads as the sangoma prayed, it also suggested a repetitive address, invocation and veneration.

Using coins to pass on messages to God or the ancestors is another striking example of prayer. The coins could be offered as gifts, used as vehicles or a combination of these. While the value of the coins may insinuate power (and thus magic), its intention is to strengthen relations with the deity, rather than perform on its own.

Shedding more light on the use of water to communicate with gods or ancestors, Mashabela observed that bottles of holy are often used in the ZCC to transfer instructions [*ditaelo*¹⁵] between the supernatural realm and that of humans (2017:6). Parrinder (1954:50) pointed out that in African Traditional Religion, wells, springs, rivers and lakes are believed to be the dwelling places of spirits and gods. When a meeting or communion is sought at En Four with a god or gods, it highlights the location's significance as a place for prayer.

Mysticism

Finally, the water rituals at En Four can be intended to offer mystical experiences. Mystical experiences offer a sense of contact with a god or gods through 'small miracles' that provide a very personal confirmation of their beliefs to a person. These may include encounters like visions and dreams, or physical manifestations such as trances, seizures or glossolalia (Stark 1999:284–285, also Schmidt 1988:359).

The description of how prophets would drink large amounts of this water to the point of vomiting in order to pass on prophetic messages, indicates a mystical use of the water. The water then produces a perceived personal miracle for the prophet. Müller (2011:86) was told of a similar mystical procedure where ZCC members would inhale steamed river water (produced by placing three heated stones in the water) to receive divine inspiration and dreams.

John Mbiti made the case that water may manifest God's omnipresence, power and care in African religious thought. 'God is spoken of as "the great Pool, contemporary of everything"' (1970:5,9,76). If the flow, flux and unending nature of water and rivers reveal a god or gods, these En

15. 'Instructions' in Setswana.

Four waters can also be argued to offer a similar mystical vision.

Findings

En Four is evidently an important and sacred place for many religious people around Pretoria.

Being located on the busy N4 highway makes it accessible and convenient; while some visitors travelled to the spring only to collect water or perform rituals, others stopped at the spring en route to other appointments. The location may be even more significant. In his study of the ZCC, Müller (2011:7) characterises the church as a 'travelling church'; members are continually travelling between their urban lives and the rural sacred centre. He proposes that their 'physical travelling precipitates a conceptual travelling ... [a] journey of the religious imagination'. Simply journeying to En Four may already enact a mystical experience, encountering small miracles, perhaps performing magic rites.

The importance of holy water cannot be overestimated. When Bosire et al. (2021:1180–1181) investigated the use of water in healing, they found this practice widespread. Sometimes, the water was used to cleanse the body by vomiting gall or bile – a process called *ukukhipha inyongo*¹⁶; at times, its power was believed to be more magical (Bosire et al. 2021:1178). They concluded that 'church water are likely a source of emotional and social support ... leading to people's improved mental and physical health' (Bosire et al. 2021:1182).

With water becoming more scarce, the sustainability of the spring is also a relevant question. I witnessed the natural shrinking of the pool, visiting before and after the dry (winter) season; in May, large portions of the hill and terrain were moist with water seeping through numerous rivulets, while in August there was the pool and its level had dropped significantly. When I asked the visitors about this, they seemed untroubled and pointed out that there was a similar spring not too far away. I found no evidence of an ecological concern for the future (and maintenance) of the site.

The visitors to En Four were remarkably friendly and open about their beliefs and rituals. They welcomed me, explained the significance and workings of the spring, guided me around and even encouraged me to make use of the holy water. I had a completely opposite reception when I tried to engage ZCC clergy afterwards. After my first visit, I repeatedly tried to make contact with St Engenas ZCC clergy, which proved to be extremely difficult. Lebeloane and Madise found the same, secretive reception in the ZCC. Clergy would only speak anonymously to them, and describe but not explain their use of water (2006:144). I wondered whether this was

16. Literally 'excreting gall or bile' (Bosire et al 2021:1179).

simply because of the guarded nature of the ZCC clergy, or if the spring presented a safer space to meet and candidly share rituals that are otherwise kept secret?

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A.M.M. declares that they are the sole author of this research article.

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