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Ilana Van Wyk
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1 Introduction

> I was so stubborn about going to the Universal Church, there was something about the church that I did not like and every time I went there, there was something inside that was fighting me that was saying, Don't go there . . . And then one day I ask myself why because the prayer is the same . . . So I said maybe I have the demon and they were saying, no, you don't have the demon, it's the church that is full of demons. But then I said, if the church is full of demons, then I will destroy the demons because I have God . . .
>
> Assistant Mhlope, 27 June 2006

Rumours from Afar

'They go there to order 4 × 4s, BMWs, sharp suits, double-storeys, jewellery, you name it. Not RDP houses and Pep-store clothes.'[1] The woman in her threadbare clothes quietly scratched her head as she continued her report on the latest church to open its doors in urban South Africa. Mrs Xoxa, always a great source of gossip, knew a lot about the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) and its Brazilian pastors even though the nearest Cathedral of Faith in Durban was 500 kilometres away. Wistfully she remarked, 'They deliver everything the next day.' The group of female craft traders listened in awed silence as eddies of dust whipped up by tourists' cars settled on their meagre wares. They were a world away from the fast cars and extravagant luxuries that the UCKG members apparently ordered from catalogues pinned to church walls.

'But it's not free. If you want it, you have to pay their price,' warned Mrs Xoxa. The women sighed knowingly, perhaps a little relieved that things were not that easy in cities either. They knew that powerful witches often demanded the blood of close relatives as payment for their supernatural knowledge and that these evil creatures fed on human misery. It

[1] In the aftermath of apartheid, the new South African government built 1.1 million homes as part of its Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). These houses are notorious for their poor quality, dreary layout and lack of town planning (Lodge 2002: 54–69). Pep is an inexpensive clothing retail store.

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was only the depraved, the desperate or bewitched that used such services. Proof of the new church's strength and of its pastors' unnatural abilities was sealed with Mrs Xoxa's next revelation that Brazilian pastors knew the National Lottery numbers (for the right price) and that they flew to South Africa on loaves of bread. They also had the uncanny ability to appear and disappear at will.

It was the year 2000, two months after the South African government had launched a National Lottery and six years after a democratic election had brought an end to half a century of apartheid. I was doing research in Maputaland, a rural and impoverished corner of KwaZulu-Natal province, when the afternoon gossip at the market turned to a church that no one had attended. As my research project ended in 2001, and as I moved to the capital city of Pretoria, more people talked about this new church. They did so with a mix of apprehension and enthrallment. Two years later, as I was casting around for a PhD project at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London, the UCKG again starred in a surprise conversation with a local. And like Mrs Xoxa, almost 9,000 kilometres away, talk of the church's success and its considerable financial resources was tinged by uneasiness about the UCKG's potential harmful effects on local communities and vulnerable (but dangerous) individuals.

It was a serendipitous encounter with a rather serious-looking young man outside SOAS's main building that again brought the UCKG to my attention. The young man was gathering signatures to prevent a Grade II-listed cinema in Walthamstow in east London from being turned into a UCKG church, a fate already suffered by the Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park. He worried that the church did not respect the cultural heritage of such venues and that its connection to the death of Victoria Climbié was sufficiently 'strange' to warrant suspicion and public action.[2]

In this much-publicised case, an eight-year-old girl from the Côte d'Ivoire had died cruelly at the hands of her great-aunt and uncle in London in 2000. According to newspaper reports, Marie-Therese Kouao and her partner were convinced that Victoria was possessed by demons and repeatedly subjected the little girl to severe beatings and torture. In the weeks prior to Victoria's death, Marie-Therese took her to the UCKG for a cure. Although a pastor noticed Victoria's poor physical condition and urged her aunt to take her to hospital, he did not report the case to the relevant authorities.[3] Instead, he prayed for her spiritual problems.

[2] Local media made much of the UCKG's conversion of movie theatres and rock venues into churches (see Anon 2002; Harrison 2003; Milmo 2003; Petre, Hastings and Lusher 2001).

[3] In Lord Laming's report on the case, he noted that the 'blinding incompetence' of police, social services, the National Health Service and the National Society for the Prevention

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In the wake of Victoria's death, the media focused on the UCKG and its African and Caribbean followers' implausible belief that the church could cure cancer, perform miracles and exorcise evil spirits (Braid 2001; Vasagar 2001). Since the British Cancer Act of 1939 made it illegal for non-medical specialists to advertise cures for cancer, the British Charity Commission opened a formal inquiry into the affairs of the UCKG (British Charity Commission Report 2003). The Commission cleared the church of responsibility for Victoria's death and, to the chagrin of the media, stated that it 'found no evidence that the . . . UCKG claimed to be able to heal individuals or purge them of demons' (Shifrin 2003). Since Victoria Climbié's case resulted in significant changes to child protection policies in the United Kingdom (UK), the media returned to her case and the UCKG each time a new incidence of child abuse was uncovered (Carvel 2008; Munro 2009).[4] In the UK, the UCKG thus gained a reputation as a cult-like church.[5] Fascinated, I attended my first service at the old Rainbow Theatre in Finsbury Park a week after meeting the young cinema conservationist.

Although little research existed on the UCKG in the UK, and I could easily have done my fieldwork here, I was intrigued by reports that this Brazilian church's most successful mission field was in South Africa (Freston 2005: 40, 51; Mathope 2004: 27; Vilakazi 2003: 20). The South African operation apparently covered the financial losses of all the UCKG's other churches in Africa while its pastors supplied missionaries to the rest of Africa, Jamaica, the UK and the United States of America (USA) (Freston 2001b: 202–3; 2005: 40, 51). I decided to shift my focus to South Africa. Finding a site was relatively uncomplicated as the church's website advertised all branch addresses, with its South African bishop stationed at Smith Street cathedral in Durban (see Figure 2).[6]

Durban

Durban is South Africa's third largest city and is situated in the province of KwaZulu-Natal on the country's east coast. It is known for its subtropical climate, beautiful beaches and famous art deco buildings. Established in 1824 as Port Natal, the town later became known as D'Urban, after

of Cruelty to Children meant that, on at least 12 occasions, workers involved in Victoria Climbié's case could have prevented her death (Batty 2003; Laming 2003).

[4] The public inquiry into Victoria Climbié's death saw the introduction of the Children Act of 2004 and the creation of the Office of the Children's Commissioner (Laming 2003: 1–427; 2009: 1–102).

[5] See, for example, Anon (2001), Braid (2001) and Treviño (2001a; 2001b).

[6] In 2008, the eThekwini municipality, which manages Durban, renamed Smith Street as Anton Lembede Street (Anon 2008).

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Figure 2 The Cathedral of Faith in Smith Street, Durban, 18 August 2005.

the British governor of the Cape colony, and with time simply as Durban (Atkins 1993: 10; Burnett 1954: 11). Demographically, Zulu-speaking 'black Africans' (68 per cent) comprise the majority of the city's inhabitants while groups of 'Indian/Asian' (20 per cent), 'white' (9 per cent) and 'coloured' (3 per cent) people make up the rest (Statistics South Africa 2003).[7] At the time of my research, Durban was spatially still largely segregated along racial lines, with almost a third of its 3.2 million inhabitants living in townships on the city's outskirts (Statistics South Africa 2003).[8] Crime, and especially violent crime, was rife in these townships – as was unemployment.

Despite hopes to the contrary, the economic plight of black South Africans had changed little in a post-apartheid dispensation. Although the new South African government introduced an affirmative action scheme to improve black people's access to employment and acted to transform the racial profile of the civil service, local jobs, especially unskilled ones,

[7] The use of these racial categories was not confined to government bureaucracies. South Africans still used racial categories established during apartheid to refer to both other people and themselves. While white, black and Indian are common descriptive terms elsewhere, 'coloured' referred to people of mixed slave descent mainly residing in the Western Cape.

[8] On racial segregation, see Mabin (1992: 405–29).

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were fast disappearing.[9] One of the main reasons for the scarcity of jobs in Durban was the government's removal of trade barriers, which bankrupted the local textile industry and made many migrant mineworkers to the Witwatersrand redundant (Crotty 2001; Davies 2001: 2; Le Roux 2001: 226; Weeks 1999: 795–811). Historically, large numbers of men had left their wives and children in 'black-only' townships or in black 'homelands' to work in mines in the country's interior (Popke 2003: 248–67).[10] In a post-apartheid era, these mineworkers returned to Durban and augmented the numbers of the unemployed. Despite huge capital investments in the area since 1994, formal employment opportunities in KwaZulu-Natal remained scarce. In the latest census, Statistics South Africa put the proportion of unemployed black people in Durban at 22.7 per cent.[11] Surveys using more conventional definitions of unemployment put the percentage of township unemployed at between 55 per cent (Rausch 2002) and 60.8 per cent (Mohamed 2002: 5).[12] For many black families, meagre state pensions for the elderly and government child support grants were their main, if not only, sources of income.

Apart from the broad legacy of apartheid, which included poor education, a lack of adequate housing and substandard healthcare for black people (Freund and Padayachee 2002; Kallaway 2002), the city was also gripped by an HIV/AIDS epidemic.[13] Government reports during my fieldwork estimated that the HIV infection rate in the area was close to 40 per cent.[14] Due to the growing number of deaths from AIDS, Durban's two largest townships, Umlazi and KwaMashu, had run out of cemetery space by 2001 (Kirk 2001; Masland 2001: 45–6).[15] The large number of deaths also resulted in funerals no longer being held exclusively on Saturdays.

Beyond such grim facts and statistics, Durban had a noticeably religious population; a variety of churches, cathedrals, mosques and temples

[9] After apartheid, the South African government introduced the Employment Equity Act (1995) and the Broad Based Black Economic Empowerment Act (2003). These laws defined the country's 'affirmative action' against the institutional racism of previous regimes.

[10] On homeland history, see Burnett (1954: 9–10, 31), Chidester (1996: 124), Etherington (1978: 8, 206) and Maxwell (1997).

[11] Using Statistics South Africa's interactive program, I filtered the 2011 census data for eThekwini municipality by population group, age group 16–60 and unemployment to get to this figure. See <http://interactive.statssa.gov.za/superweb> (accessed 13 January 2013).

[12] Statistics South Africa, however, uses a minimal definition of the employed as 'those aged 15–64 years who, during the reference week: did any work for at least one hour; or had a job or business' (Statistics South Africa 2011: xvi).

[13] On apartheid education, see Kallaway (2002), Unterhalter et al. (1991).

[14] See the Department of Health (2003: 6; 2006), Robins (2006: 314) and the World Health Organization (2005).

[15] Of the municipality's 53 cemeteries, 51 were filled to capacity by 2003 (Wines 2004).

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More information

dotted the cityscape. But, like its people, religion was largely segregated. The city's Indian population attended mosques and Hindu temples while white and black people attended separate Christian churches. Although new Pentecostal Charismatic churches (PCCs) such as the Durban Christian Centre's (DCC's) Jesus Dome drew racially mixed crowds, distinct theological traditions and the city's spatial segregation ensured that other congregations reflected the demographics of the areas in which they were situated (see Helgesson 2006).

Christianity formed an integral part of township life.[16] Here, historic mission churches such as the Methodist, Presbyterian, Anglican, Wesleyan, Dutch Reformed and Roman Catholic churches, as well as various Baptist churches and German and Scandinavian Lutheran churches, vied with Zionist, Pentecostal, African Initiated Churches (AICs) and PCCs for members.[17] Churches and prayer groups constantly cropped up all over the city. While some PCCs erected enormous buildings, many new groups shared established church buildings with other denominations or erected large tents on open fields. Smaller groups met in front rooms, school halls, garages and backyards.

Outside these overtly religious spaces, Durban's independent iterant preachers addressed people on trains, in minibus taxis, in public squares and on busy city corners. Among regular churchgoers, evangelising was common and taken up with great enthusiasm in public spaces and in the privacy of people's homes. Township residents constantly invited neighbours, family and friends to attend their churches for special sermons and celebrations, to be healed or blessed or just to visit. Although people often declared strong affiliations to certain churches or denominations, their attendance at broadly defined Christian events and at other churches in the city were rather unrestrained. Welcoming newcomers and visitors was a regular feature of most township churches while business, social and political meetings often started with a prayer. Gospel music and ringtones for mobile phones were also popular, as were the religious programmes on local radio stations.

An Elusive Quarry

Given the vibrancy of Christianity in the townships and the eagerness with which people evangelised in Durban's streets, I expected my

[16] An estimated 80 per cent of black South Africans are Christian (Statistics South Africa 2003). In the 2011 census, questions relating to religious affiliation were excluded because they were 'low on the list of priorities by the users of census data' (<http://www.statssa.gov.za/census2011/faq.asp> (accessed 14 December 2012)).

[17] On the local mission history, see Burnett (1954), Cope (1990: 431–51), Japha, Japha, Le Grange and Todeschini (1993: 17–38), Etherington (1978), Gaitskell (1995), Guy (1983), Meintjies (1988), St George (1966: 4) and Sundkler (1961).

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fieldwork in the UCKG to be relatively easy. It was not. For one thing, both bishop and pastors at the church refused to answer emails or personal calls or to grant interviews. While an open-door policy welcomed all, pastors asked assistants to question me discreetly when I first visited and to watch my every move in church. I consequently interacted with pastors only in church services, and briefly afterwards, and occasionally exchanged greetings in the basement or corridors of the church. Although unsatisfactory, this limited contact shared in the experiences of a majority of UCKG members who had little interaction with clergymen.

Perhaps the most surprising and challenging part of doing research on the UCKG was the lack of intimate social ties between church members. Unlike other local churches, the UCKG did not have Bible study, prayer or women's groups and did not offer any social, educational or health services where an anthropologist could get to know and talk to other congregants. There were no social gatherings apart from the six daily services, and even in these, people rarely talked to other churchgoers. Membership was loosely defined around church attendance rather than through subscription or social participation. Furthermore, the church had a very high membership turnover rate and most people attended church alone or in the company of a friend rather than with family. Few people knew more than a handful of other members and they were reluctant to expand their circle of church acquaintances.

Unlike many other newcomers, I was fortunate to make a friend in church on the second day I attended services at Smith Street cathedral. Kushoni seemed an ideal anthropological contact. She could explain her beliefs and those of others with eloquence and patience and introduced me to her church acquaintances, a diverse group of people that included a nurse, a female assistant in church, a court translator, a newly converted, unemployed former Hindu man, a female street trader, two female pensioners and an Indian magistrate. My friendship with Kushoni was easy-going because we were the same age, shared a middle-class background and were graduates. However, three months into my fieldwork, Kushoni left the UCKG. She broke off all contact with people in the church and I did not see or hear from her again. Her erstwhile friends insisted that Satan had lured her away from the UCKG and that she had been turned into a prostitute, an *umKhovu* (zombie) or a similarly depraved creature. They saw no point in trying to contact Kushoni or in trying to search for her.

As Kushoni's group of friends quickly disintegrated, I realised how much work she had put into her church friendships and how rare this kind of work was in the UCKG. Each one of her old acquaintances seemed to resist the intimacies of friendship but happily accepted lifts, help with UK visa application forms and occasional loans from me. Among them, Phukile, a street trader, seemed particularly keen to employ my resources

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Excerpt
More information

to her own ends. Since she believed that evil forces were 'blocking [her] ways' and that God did not help the meek, Phukile repeatedly bankrupted herself in the church's campaigns, only to 'demand' help from her long-abused family and shrinking number of friends.[18]

Intrigued by the ways in which her spiritual war was elaborated in daily life and keen to assert some control over her unscheduled visits and incessant demands, I asked Phukile to become my paid research assistant in February 2005. At the time, she had no source of income apart from a government child support grant of 170 South African rand (R) (US$25) per month and agreed to arrange visits with her friends, neighbours, kin and acquaintances in Durban's townships.[19] In doing our social rounds, Phukile was often surprised when one of her friends or family members admitted to attending the UCKG. Since our other hosts often and without prompting declared their church membership or invited us to visit their churches, this was unusual. While covert UCKG members were hospitable and generous with their time and conversations, they rarely replicated this in church, even when they recognised me.

Five months into my fieldwork in Umlazi and KwaDabeka, Phukile's spiritual war almost cost us our lives. Unbeknown to me, a young woman had fallen gravely ill shortly after our visit and died a week later. Her family apparently identified me as the prime suspect in her death because I had touched the young woman's 'shadow' by handling her photograph and church uniform. Although she had full-blown AIDS at the time of our visit, the Ingozis did not accept that my visit and the girl's deterioration in health were coincidental. Very few things were.[20] As it happened, the Nazaretha church was involved in a violent split in which two warring pastors had hired thugs to kill and intimidate rival members.[21] As members of the Nazaretha church, the Ingozis were in the thick of this battle and suspected that an enemy pastor had sent me to their house to bewitch and kill their daughter. Phukile did not tell me of these suspicions and skilfully avoided the family while she prepared to battle their demons. When she was ready, Phukile suggested that we call on the Ingozis. She had warned them of our visit and must have known that they were preparing to exact vengeance for the death of the young woman. Unaware of these hidden undercurrents, I visited the Ingozis on that fateful day. We had barely exchanged greetings before a man with a gun rushed out of

[18] See 'Terms and Terminology Used in the UCKG'.
[19] In February 2005, the South African rand traded at an average of US$0.16 (see <http://www.xe.com/currencytables/?from=ZAR&date=2005-02-15> (accessed 15 October 2013)). I rounded figures off to the nearest US$5.
[20] See Chapter 5.
[21] This AIC was also known as the Shembe church, Nazareth Baptist church or 'iBandla lamaNazaretha' (Church of the Nazarites).

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the house, shouting that he would kill me. Fearing that he was on drugs or deranged, I grabbed Phukile and ran out of the yard. Astoundingly, she suggested that we stop at a house two doors away to interview people there. I did not know what to make of her dangerous suggestion and instead flagged down the first taxi I saw and headed home. When I asked about her strange behaviour the next day, Phukile told me about the witchcraft suspicions and her own plan to 'fight the devil'.[22] Although she was not party to the Ingozis' plan, I realised that I could not participate in Phukile's dangerous and unpredictable war, especially as I was blind to it.

The incident in Umlazi came at a rather fortuitous moment as Phukile was beginning to exhaust her network. We had visited 41 families and five *sangomas* (healers/diviners) in Umlazi and KwaDabeka, many of them two or three times. Although I had also had short conversations with 155 people at church, I decided to focus my research exclusively on the experiences of church members who participated in the June 2005 Campaign of Israel, a highlight in the church's annual calendar. I hoped that a friendly young assistant called Dingi would be willing to introduce me to her church friends. However, despite being in the UCKG for more than ten years, Dingi could refer me to only two friends willing to have a conversation about the church. She also feared that her involvement in research on the UCKG could compromise her position as an assistant and suggested that I contact her sister. In return for modest compensation, Thandi eagerly helped organise a string of interviews. Over the next three months, she organised 28 interviews with UCKG members and ex-members. These interviews took place at my house over lunch and, due to Thandi's quick wit and probing questions, often turned into lively discussions, some five hours long.

I finally left Durban in August 2005. However, worried about the possible uniqueness of the Smith Street branch, I continued to visit a number of other branches of varying sizes in Durban, Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg and Pietermaritzburg during the course of writing this book. All of them, to a greater or lesser extent, shared the (un)social characteristics I encountered at Smith Street.

Durban, the Devil and the Universal Church

The lack of sociability in the UCKG, the high turnover rate in membership and the fact that church pastors were constantly transferred between branches made it hard to trace the historical trajectory of the church's growth in Durban. I was therefore very excited when Thandi managed

[22] See 'Terms and Terminology Used in the UCKG'.

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Excerpt
More information

to track down a woman called Ncoma who had been a staunch UCKG member since 1993.

Disappointingly, all Ncoma could remember about the UCKG's first branch in Durban was that 'people prayed strong'.[23] To jog her memory, I took her to Victoria Street market where the church had opened its first local branch in April 1993. Picking our way through stalls selling spices, curios and fresh vegetables, Ncoma recognised the shop where she had attended her first UCKG service. The shop had an unassuming plate-glass front, strip lighting, tiled floors and once-white walls. Ncoma remembered that when the UCKG occupied the space, there were fabric drapes on the walls, a small lectern near the back wall and rows of white plastic chairs. The electric keyboard came much later. 'It wasn't really necessary,' she said, 'because we had the Holy Spirit that time and people were just singing.'

Ncoma attended her first service here two days after her thirtieth birthday. Her boyfriend at the time had given her R100 (US$35), which she had used to gild her front tooth at the market.[24] The painful procedure occasioned a trip to the market's traditional healers, where someone had handed her a pamphlet. It was an invitation to a free healing service at the UCKG. Ncoma accepted the invitation because it was close by, cost nothing, and because the pamphlet specifically mentioned toothache. 'You see, it was a sign,' she said.

Of that first service Ncoma remembered only that a white Brazilian pastor 'prayed strong and then the pain was gone'. Two days later, 'the real miracle happened' when she found a job in a local government department. Prior to this, Ncoma had been job hunting for six years and was plagued by 'bad luck'. At the time, convinced that she was a victim of witchcraft, Ncoma attended many local churches, healers and prophets. None of them were successful in helping her and she resigned herself to a 'miserable life'.[25] That was until she walked into the UCKG, where she learned to fight Satan in order to 'overcome his demons' and as a result became 'blessed'.[26] She finished her testimony by saying, 'I was very strong that time'.

Ncoma's testimony was similar to many others I had heard in the UCKG. But unlike other UCKG members, Ncoma was one of a handful of members who had met the local founders and who had seen the church move from a humble shop-front location to a large cathedral, with 19 other branches in the city. Given her fond recollections of that time and

[23] See 'Terms and Terminology Used in the UCKG'.
[24] Informal, untrained dentists at the market fixed gold to customers' teeth and occasionally fitted earrings (Hemson 2003: 15). In 1993, US$1 traded at R3.27 (Officer 2013). I rounded figures off to the nearest US$5.
[25] See 'Terms and Terminology Used in the UCKG'.
[26] See 'Terms and Terminology Used in the UCKG'.

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