Suspicious spirits: New Christianity and Radical Distrust in South Africa

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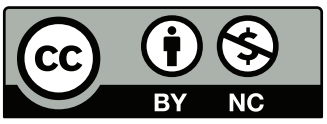
Abstract

Over the last twenty years, a number of anthropologists have questioned the discipline's "epistemology of intimacy" to show that in some parts of the world, Otherness plays an integral role in the construction of social unity. While Otherness has been rehabilitated as a productive, even unifying, relationship in certain contexts, it remains an insecure premise through which to relate in parts of the world where people idealize pure mutual identification and believe in the reality of witchcraft. In such places, Otherness is always implicated as a dangerous potential in even the most intimate relationships. South African churches have long resisted this potential in the ways that they relate to fellow Christians in church and to the social world beyond it. In contrast to their "hermeneutics of faith", I pay specific attention in this paper to a church in South Africa whose religious ethic centred on a radical "hermeneutics of suspicion" that led believers to relate to their own bodies, fellow churchgoers, and a wider social world in terms of socially threatening Otherness. I argue that members of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, where this ethic was elaborated, found in radical Otherness the possibility of an ontologically singular position from which they could attempt to remake social worlds that would be immune from witchcraft – without exposing themselves to the dangers of new social relations.

Keywords: otherness, witchcraft, UCKG, hermeneutics of suspicion



Introduction

The anthropological record has long suggested that human social relations, particularly among people who spend a lot of time together, rest on "pure mutual identification" (Stasch 2009, 7) and that strangers either threaten the social order (Fabian 1983), or exist as an alien Other in relation to which people construct identities and frame unequal relations of power (Said 1978). Over the last twenty years, a number of anthropologists have questioned this "epistemology of intimacy" (Keane 2005, 59–88) to show that Otherness could be a "constitutive relation" (Viveiros de Castro 2001, 19–43) in kinship and judicial processes (Kelly 2012, 753–768). Some groups, like the Korowai of West Papua, Indonesia, for instance, even elaborate divisions and differences in their living arrangements and kinship practices to "make qualities of otherness the central focus of their social relations" (Stasch 2009, 1, see also 6–14). This Otherness-based unity of relations also extends to an invisible realm where the Korowai's framing of demons and witches as monstrosities serve as queries "into the possibility and conditions of persons being socially unified" (Stasch 2009, 218, see also 53 –56, 212–223).

While Otherness has been rehabilitated as a productive, even unifying, relationship in certain contexts, it remains an insecure premise on which to relate in parts of the world where people idealize mutual identification and believe in the reality of witchcraft. In these contexts, witchcraft not only undermines sociality, but threatens the very foundations on which sociality is built. As Malcolm Ruel (1970, 54–56) said many years ago of the Banyang of Cameroon, since "everyone could be the 'witch'… relations were [already] based on an idiom of deceit [since] … things were not necessarily what they seemed to be". In such settings, people relate to others, and particularly to those closest to them (Geschiere 2013), in terms of a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Josselson 2004, 1–28) because their visible world is determined by invisible powers and forces, often knowingly directed by witches and the unconscious desires of Others (Geschiere 1997).

It is a familiar ontological landscape in South Africa where scholars have long shown that witchcraft beliefs often function as a "subtext" (Niehaus 2010, 65–77) to the ways that many read kinship relationships, their health, the state, and economic life (Ashforth 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Niehaus 2001, 2012) – but seldom their churches. While many believers certainly talk about the power of their pastors and ministers to fight witchcraft and recognize the kind of inequalities and jealousies in their churches that outside it often give rise to witchcraft accusations, few would embrace the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that props up witchcraft beliefs as a specifically Christian religious ethic. In part, this has to do with the important historical influence of the Social Gospel or social Christianity in South Africa, which holds that Christians should enact an ideal society in church and play an active role in shaping society to be more conducive to conversion (van Wyk 2014, 25–26). Many South African Christians who belong to Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs) also believe that the power of the Holy Spirit, which they use to fight witchcraft, is of a different order and can vanquish the supernatural powers of witches and demons (cf. Meyer 1999). In a perfect world, such Christians have no need to fear witchcraft, even though they have to fight it as part of the spiritual war against the devil.

In this paper, I pay specific attention to a church in South Africa whose religious ethic centred on a radical "hermeneutics of suspicion" that led believers to relate to their own bodies, fellow churchgoers, and a wider social world in terms of socially threatening Otherness. I argue that members of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), where this ethic was elaborated, found in radical Otherness the possibility of an ontologically singular position from which they could

attempt to remake social worlds that would be immune from witchcraft – without exposing themselves to the dangers of new social relations. Here, I develop this argument by situating the UCKG in the context of a broader South African church history in which various church denominations have encountered and dealt with witchcraft for close to 200 years. I then trace the ways in which the UCKG elaborated this ethic by focusing on the life and travails of a few selected church members.[1] I draw my data from the research I did in the UCKG, starting with an 18-month ethnographic fieldwork stint in 2004–2005, followed by occasional visits and interviews with members over the next 13 years.

Christianity and witchcraft in South Africa

At first, the arrival of Christianity in South Africa did little to disrupt the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that marks witchcraft beliefs in the country. Indeed, many of the early missionaries confronted local invisible forces in ways that were immediately recognizable to their potential converts as the behaviour of people with occult powers.[2] In this, missionaries represented themselves as agents of an unseen, powerful god who answered their prayers for rain, spiritual protection, and healing – just as diviners petitioned the ancestors for similar results[3] (Etherington 1978, 52–59, 65, 79; Delius 2001, 432–433). Responding to these claims, locals directly accused some missionaries and converts of sorcery (Etherington 1978, 38; Delius 2001, 436–440) and circulated rumours that Christians ate children and used very strong magic to effect conversions (Etherington 1978, 65). Perhaps not surprisingly, locals fiercely resisted Christianity because like witchcraft, Christian conversion was known to destroy kinship relationships and mutual obligations (Etherington 1978, 55–75; Delius 2001, 437–438, 441). The missionaries' reputations were not helped by the fact that many locals who had been accused of witchcraft, or who had refused the call from their ancestors to become diviners, found refuge on mission stations (Etherington 1978, 96; Delius 2001, 436–440).

While some missionaries demanded that locals renounce traditional beliefs and fight "witchdoctors" as powerful enemies (Dube 2014, 157–172; Etherington 1978, 59–62), most hoped that ignoring or forbidding such beliefs[4] would make them obsolete (Etherington 1978, 40–42; Rio, MacCarthy and Blanes 2017, 13). As mission churches be-

[1] I have used pseudonyms for all interlocutors in this piece because so many attended the church without the knowledge of their friends and families and frequently left the UCKG, denying ever having attended it at all. They would not want a record of their one-time membership to exist, especially since UCKG members are so often accused of witchcraft.

[2] As Bernault (2019, 5) argued, "*proximate*, *conversant* and *compatible* imaginaries of power existed across the racial divide [between French colonialists and locals in Gabon] … Yet, in the realm of collective power and individual agency, rulers and ruled not only infringed on and clashed with each other's worlds, but also held mutually intelligible ideas, projects and fantasies. These imaginaries, and the startling moments of recognition and awareness that colonial agents experienced on the ground, were central to the machinery of colonial domination and the world that came after it."

[3] In many African contexts, people believe that the powers that diviners and traditional healers use to heal and protect people can also be used to harm or bewitch them; the use to which powers are put are determined by the diviner's intentions, which could be directed by a well-paying customer (Geschiere 1997; van Wyk 2014, 116–140).

[4] In 1879, the American Board of Missionaries accepted the so-called *Umsunduze* rules for their Zulu mission stations, which created a sharp divide between heathen and Christian practices (Sundkler 1961, 26). Other missions accepted similar rules.

came "mainline"[5] churches, they embraced a "hermeneutics of faith" (Josselson 2004, 1–28) that aimed to replace the suspicious sociality of witchcraft with the Social Gospel (see Elphick and Davenport 1997; Jacobs 2015). This often "backfired so that witchcraft fears, sorcery practices, and healing became more or less clandestine spheres outside and separate from the [mainline] church" (Rio, MacCarthy and Blanes 2017, 13). Christians who wanted protection from witchcraft and ways to appease and petition their ancestors found various ways to do so in "Ethiopian", Zionist[6] and later Pentecostal churches (Sundkler 1961, 19–25, 95–99, 181–190). In these churches, traditional diviners and healers (*sangomas*) played a central role in prophesying, healing, witch-finding, and purification rituals (Anderson 2005; Sundkler 1961: 109–111, 202–226, 253–264).

In the early 1990s, a number of PCC pastors and prophets arrived in South Africa to publicly and spectacularly confront older Pentecostal and African Initiated Churches (AICs)[7] for ostensibly promoting witchcraft and allowing believers to consort with demonic spirits (Anderson 2005, 66–83). Of these arrivals, the UCKG, a PCC of Brazilian origins, was probably one of the most successful. The church found quick and enormous success and saw large numbers of people streaming to its numerous cathedrals and shopfront locations to witness the church's fights against witches and demons, while hundreds of thousands of people tuned in to its daily television and radio shows. By the early 2000s, the UCKG was one of the largest churches in South Africa, but also one of the most reviled in popular discourse for the ways in which its prosperity gospel spurred believers to act in selfish ways that negatively impacted on their families' lives (Anderson 2005, 86; van Wyk 2014, 2018). However, for believers who were tired of the ineffectiveness of AICs and the "word information" they received in mainline churches, the ability and willingness of the UCKG to fight witchcraft was a source of considerable appeal (van Wyk 2014, 57, 116–140; see also Newell 2007, 461[8]). In the last few years, the UCKG has lost some of its prominence – and followers – to newer prophetic churches, but it remains a visible presence in South Africa's religious landscape.

While the UCKG was known as curiously unsociable (van Wyk 2018, 269–281), other PCCs offered spaces of exceptional trust and sociality that were set in opposition to familial witchcraft (Anderson 2005; Klaits 2010; Rio, MacCarthy and Blanes 2017, 18). Like elsewhere on the continent, PCCs tried to achieve such communities by demanding that believers "untie" social bonds with their extended families and traditional beliefs (Meyer 1998a, 316–349; Meyer 1999, 170–208; van Dijk 2001, 218–222).[9] In practice, however, believers here, as in other parts of Africa, often remained "tied" to non-PCC family and friends because they were depen-

[5] While the term has been subject to critique in other contexts, 'mainline' churches in South Africa were defined by virtue of their membership of the South African Council of Churches (SACC). When it was founded in 1968, the SACC included churches that traced their roots to nineteenth and twentieth century missionary work in the country and that generally maintained strong organizational and theological links to their "mother" churches. African Independent Churches and Pentecostal Churches were at first excluded from the category of "mainline" churches.

[6] According to Etherington (1978, 155), Ethiopian churches had their origins in schisms with missions while Zionist tendencies were first visible in KwaZulu-Natal in the 1880s (see also Sundkler 1961, 53–64).

[7] Former "Ethiopian" churches, Zionist churches, and prophetic churches.

[8] Newell's ethnography relies heavily on fieldwork he did in *L'Eglise Universelle de la Royaume de Dieu*, an Ivoirian branch of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG).

[9] Katrien Pype (2017, 115–144) showed that Pentecostals in Kinshasa no longer avoided witchcraft by breaking ties with the "past", i.e. with village life, kinship obligations, and traditional religion, but now "break with the future" as they try to avoid the *kindoki* witchcraft that circulates through modern technologies such as cellphones, the internet, and television.

dent on them (Englund 2007; Meyer 1998a, 316–349), because they saw conversion as a never-completed process (Engelke 2004), and because they often harboured doubts over the efficacy and motives of spiritual leaders and technologies (Kirsch 2004, 699–709; Newell 2007, 484–487). PCCs' "radical promise of equality" (Englund 2007, 107) was also often undermined by the material inequality between congregants (Meyer 1998b, 751–777; Newell 2007), making envy a "key moral issue associated with witchcraft and sorcery" (Rio, MacCarthy and Blanes 2017, 19).

Anthropologists have long been interested in the dynamics of witchcraft beliefs in Africa. They have shown that beyond the intimacies of the "house" (Geschiere 2013), witchcraft beliefs also brought suspicion into neighbourly relationships and exaggerated generational and gender differences (Stadler 1996, 87–110). And since sociality is also implied in the ways that people make money, fall ill, imagine the state, and engage with technology, many scholars have shown that witchcraft beliefs shape people's engagements with daily life, politics (Marshall 2009; West 2005), money (Geschiere 1997), and deadly diseases (Niehaus 2007, 2012; Stadler 2003, 127–139). Particularly influential in this body of work is the work of Jean and John Comaroff (1999, 279–303; 2000, 291–343), who interpreted witchcraft and the "occult economies" of the UCKG as ways in which locals at the margins of a global economy understood the invisible production of value and other "violent abstractions" that resulted from "millennial capitalism". In a similar frame, Newell (2007, 461–487) argued that in Côte d'Ivoire, the UCKG's discourse had "itself become a form of witchcraft". Like witchcraft discourses, the church unwittingly employed a "totalizing discourse" to transcend material and occult worlds in order to produce individual wealth and health in neoliberal contexts of scarcity and inequality. As such, "Ivoirians regard [the UCKG] with all the awe and ambivalence they typically reserve for those with the power of witchcraft; churches are accused of being sites of greed, of corruption and even sorcery itself, while, without apparent contradiction, they are respected and revered for their abilities to heal" (Newell 2007, 469). In this, Newell (2007, 487) argued, both witchcraft and UCKG discourses aimed to resolve the "problematic interaction of the global neoliberal economy with local ideals of domesticated agency…but…with contradicting vectors… These religious positions therefore vie with one another as competing ritual techniques, each having the potential to encompass the other according to the alternating and conflicted perspective of the believer".

While I agree that locals drew parallels between the UCKG and witchcraft, and even directly accused the church pastors and members of practising witchcraft, I think we should take the ontological experiences and epistemological certainties of believers more seriously. Their behaviour in church and outside it was not merely a metaphor for understanding larger economic processes, but religious technologies to change the world and overcome the witchcraft in it. It is for this reason that it is necessary to look in some detail at the ways in which believers elaborated a "hermeneutics of suspicion" in church.

Initial suspicions

I met Phukile in 2004 through Kushoni.[10] Since Kushoni and I became friends on the second day of my fieldwork at the UCKG, I did not realize how rare friendships in the church were. Indeed, I would later describe the UCKG as a "church of strangers" (van Wyk 2014) in which each member desperately tried to avoid the intimacies that other Christians took for granted; those between

[10] In this article, I have reread and rearranged bits of ethnography that were scattered throughout my other work to tell a more coherent story of the lives of three UCKG members whom I knew well. I supplemented their stories with details from my fieldnotes.

members, between pastors and their flock, and between the clergy. At the time, Phukile was one of a group of eight people that Kushoni frequently engaged with at church. They included a converted Hindu man, a male magistrate of Indian Muslim heritage, and six women: a nurse, a court translator, a church usher, two pensioners, and Phukile, a street trader. Kushoni's easy association with this group of people and the generosity with which she included me in their group felt very familiar in a South African church context where much emphasis is often placed on fellowship.

Three months into my fieldwork, Kushoni left the UCKG and broke off all contact. Her cellphone was disconnected and her other friends at church professed to know little of her whereabouts. In fact, they seemed unconcerned, almost callous, as they explained why I should forget her disappearance. The magistrate, who had once praised Kushoni's old-fashioned values, suspected that she had been turned into a prostitute. The court translator and the ex-Hindu suspected that "the Nigerians" who were "invading" the city centre and who were starting to attend services at the UCKG had effected this transformation. The two elderly women insisted that Satan had lured Kushoni away from the church while Phukile and the church usher, Dingi, were convinced that Kushoni had been turned into a zombie by unknown persons. None of Kushoni's former church friends saw any point in trying to save her from such dark forces and, like the magistrate, soon speculated about her moral failings and how these contributed to her fate. Within two weeks, Kushoni's erstwhile friends no longer sat together in church and stopped meeting after services to talk.

Only Phukile sought me out at church and only because she thought that I could get her a job in the United Kingdom (UK). She knew that I had studied there. Phukile did not believe that I had no influence over the businesses that employed South Africans abroad, especially after a nurse in church thanked me for printing out an application form from a UK nursing recruitment campaign. Even though she had only completed grade ten, two years short of matriculating from high school, Phukile insisted that I print off the same application form for her. When I explained that the job was only for qualified nurses, she harrumphed in a way that made it clear that she thought I was lying. Frustrated by her disbelief, I invited her to my house to show her the job qualification requirements on the company's website. She was still not satisfied and mumbled something about people creating websites. We were still relatively newly acquainted, so I thought that I had misheard. Surely this woman did not think that I had gone to the trouble of creating a website with the sole purpose of thwarting her ambition to work as a nurse in the UK? I tried to point out that even in South Africa, her lack of a matric certificate would not get her a professional nursing job. She insisted that I did not have "faith". I did not know how to overcome her suspicions of my supposed obstruction and kept giving her UK job advertisements for which she did not qualify. I secretly hoped that her distrust would shift to the medical companies that would reject her applications.

After attending a Monday service in which Pastor Sipho told congregants to be "stubborn" and to "persevere in making your dreams a reality", Phukile ramped up her efforts. She started showing up at my door most mornings before dawn, knocking until I opened. Since my bachelor flat had a glass door with a direct line of sight to my bed and galley kitchen, I could not hide. And even when I wanted to, I felt sympathy for this single mother of two children who was trying to make a living without family support. During her 'visits', Phukile would constantly talk about white people's "luck" and would gently chide me for not sharing this racial knowledge. I felt paralysed by her suspicions.

Up to this point, neither Phukile's suspicions of me nor Kushoni's erstwhile friends' suspicions of her were unexpected. The social lines of suspicion were neatly drawn

between insiders and outsiders. By virtue of leaving the church, and, I assumed, its tight-knit social group, Kushoni became the topic of all kinds of gossip (cf. Gluckman 1963, 307–316). And although I attended church daily, Phukile knew that I had not pledged any money in its campaigns, which cast doubt on the authenticity of my membership. I hoped that Phukile's suspicions would diminish as I gradually became accepted as a more dependable member of the UCKG.

Fertile suspicion

This did not happen. In fact, when I asked Phukile to accompany me on fieldwork trips around Durban and as I started to engage with her on a daily basis, her suspicions of me heightened and her expressions of them sharpened. While she remained sceptical of my supposedly good intentions, she started to focus her suspicions on the integrity of my very being. At first, she made barbed comments about my dilapidated car and my lacklustre participation in church campaigns. These comments were at first couched as helpful advice to someone who had not tried a fool-proof remedy for her obvious problems. Like many other UCKG members, she believed that if I sacrificed more money in church, I would become a "proper woman of God" and get my car "upgraded" to a Mercedes Benz SLK or a similarly "blessed" car (see. van Wyk 2014, 171–201). I later realized that in UCKG-speak, she was suggesting that Satan and his demons were blocking the flow of God's "blessings" into my life and that I should take up spiritual arms against them to ensure a life of fabulous wealth, health, and popularity (van Wyk 2014, 41), or in the short term, to drive a more respectable car.

Phukile was less diplomatic after we interviewed a local *sangoma*. I did not know it at the time, but the UCKG pastors frequently preached against such "devilish" traditional practitioners (see Newell 2007, 485). During the interview, Phukile became increasingly surly and tried her utmost to disrupt and cut it short (see van Wyk 2014, 37–40). Afterwards, she pointedly told me to attend an exorcism at church. Phukile suspected that a demon working with the *sangoma* had breached the spiritual protections that she supposed I had in place and that it now commanded my body and mind. Having been compromised in this way, I also posed a danger to her and to other people that I came into contact with, since demons were easily transmissible between people.

In Phukile's social world, I was not the only person of which she was suspicious. She told me numerous stories about her aunts, grandmother, various cousins, extended family, prospective mother-in-law, boyfriend, neighbours, and one-time friends who "worked" with demons to "defeat" her. She suspected that every single one of them was using dark powers to block her longed-for overseas job, fancy house, happy marriage, healthy children, and popularity from becoming realities. Time and again, she would interpret the most innocuous (to my eyes at least) behaviour as evidence of her family's dark deeds. For instance, when her future sister-in-law died unexpectedly, Phukile suspected that the girl's mother had used the wake as an opportunity to attack Phukile. She insisted that her future mother-in-law had poisoned the food that was put out for the mourners, in order to incapacitate Phukile and turn her young daughter into a child slave. Phukile was also convinced that the reason her estranged boyfriend, who worked as a taxi driver, did not pay child support regularly was because his mother had bewitched him, stealing the money for her own greedy purposes.

Since none of these future in-laws or family members were members of the UCKG, I interpreted Phukile's suspicions as part of a well-known process in which new converts to PCCs often cut off ties with friends and family as they attempted to make a break with the past, a process that was often more rhe-

torical than actualized. But, like most other UCKG members, Phukile could not break ties with her family or wider social circle because she remained fundamentally dependent on them for a roof over her head (in the case of her aunt), child support money (her ex-boyfriend), social backing in family feuds (her grandmother and aunts), and unforeseen financial windfalls (the death of her mother). She also desperately craved the love and acceptance of her family and often remarked that this was one of the areas in her life where the devil worked the hardest to "defeat" her.

Suspect Families

Determined to fight back against the devil, Phukile religiously attended the UCKG's Thursday and Saturday services, as well as the *Isiwasho Esingcwele* (Washing with the Holy Spirit) services on Tuesdays. On Thursdays, UCKG members fought against the demons that worked in their families, while Saturday services were devoted to the ones that scuppered marriages, fertility, and romantic relationships. On Tuesday afternoons at 5 pm, in their *Isiwasho* services, the UCKG pastors turned their fighting attention to the spirits of dead family members. Phukile participated in endless campaigns to change her family and loved ones. She also surreptitiously used the holy water, oil, and salt handed out in these services to cook her family's meals and sprinkled it on the walls of the home they lived in to exorcize the demons undermining the longed-for harmony and goodwill that she was working towards.

Phukile was not alone in this work. Most UCKG members that I spoke to "struggled" with their kin and complained that family members "fought" the church and used various tactics to get them out of the church. Given the enormous sums of money that UCKG members pledged in church campaigns, often from household budgets for food, school fees, and transport, it was perhaps not surprising that families objected to the church. Or that UCKG members often attended church in branches far removed from their homes, where people did not know them and where they were unlikely to run into family members or neighbours who could tell others about their membership (van Wyk 2014, 202–232).

On Thursdays and during the main services on Sundays, I listened to countless testimonies of church members who had "overcome" the demons in their families and who now attended church with "blessed" sons, daughters, and husbands. Phukile was particularly impressed by one older woman's testimony. As one of the few people who came to church with her family, Phukile explained that the woman's son used to be a devilish Rastafarian and fought with her about everything. He even refused to wear the new clothes that she had bought for him. But, she continued, the mother prayed very strongly for her wayward son until she had her "result". One day, out of the blue, the son cut off his dreadlocks and asked his mother if he could get the clothes that she had bought for him in the 1990s. "If God can change a Rastafarian, he will change my mother-in-law and my aunty!" Phukile exclaimed.

While hopeful that a similar result might be worked in her own life, Phukile also knew many stories of violent encounters between families and the UCKG. Dingi's father had very publicly stormed into the church during a Campaign of Israel, punched her devout mother for stealing household money, and dragged her out of the church. When one of the pastors interceded, her father threatened to kill him because he suspected that the pastor was having an affair with his wife. Dingi's father saw no reason to divert money from his household to this mega-rich church or its adulterous pastors, and said so loudly. While the congregation was scandalized, no one intervened, but many prayers in the service that followed were directed at Dingi's father and the demons that had directed his actions. Church members also testified in church

about the husbands, sons, and grandsons who quietly threatened them at home, stole their sacrifices, and tried to follow them to church to catch them in the act of "wasting money".

Church pastors were well aware that the UCKG's campaigns and tithing Sundays produced enormous tension in households where believers were often lone members of the church (see also Newell 2007, 474). They repeatedly warned their congregants to hide tithes and campaign sacrifices in places where their families would not be able to find them. Pastors also told their congregants to protect themselves from families who were not "in the same faith" and who attended traditional ceremonies and consulted *sangomas*. Since such kin "worked with Satan", believers knew that they harboured dangerous demons and that these demons had to be fought in church – and with God's weapons.

For many church members, the existence of family demons, the evil of their ancestors, and the work of witchcraft was proven in the UCKG's daily exorcisms, where pastors battled witches and demons in the bodies of believers (cf. Meyer 1999, 207). On Thursdays in particular, people manifested spirits that claimed to be speaking as – or sent by – the possessed person's grandparents, aunts, uncles, parents, and siblings. In unearthly growls, these spirits would make the most spectacular claims: that they had caused the possessed person to fail at a business, or secure a job, killed people, made them ill, caused their divorces, and worked against their ability to fall pregnant. In the Tuesday *Isiwasho* services, the pastors repeatedly asserted that the *amadlosi* (ancestors) were demons, that the *sangomas* who "worked" with them were witches, and that those who consulted *sangomas* or venerated their ancestors would be infected with demons. In each *Isiwasho,* former *sangomas* confessed to their complicity in witchcraft, while *amadlosi* demons manifested in those who had attended ceremonies for their ancestors or who had consulted *sangomas* (van Wyk 2014, 44–47). The pastors fought these spirits by switching to Zulu, calling the *amadlosi* by their names and forcing them to confess their crimes, a practice that other local PCCs viewed with suspicion. During the *Isiwashos,* pastors also sprinkled holy water in ways that resembled traditional cleansing rituals and made extensive use of blessed holy oil, salt, and various other objects imbued with spiritual powers in similar ways and to similar ends as such things were used by *sangomas,* other traditional practitioners, and AICs (van Wyk 2014, 54–55; see also Newell 2007, 470–477, 486–487).

In the UCKG, the "witchcraft of the house", as Peter Geschiere (2013) called it, was particularly dangerous and members were explicitly warned not to trust their family members or other loved ones. While the ambiguity and perils of intimacy certainly led to such witchcraft suspicions, in the UCKG they were further fuelled by the church's specific teachings on the danger of "emotions". UCKG pastors repeatedly warned that "emotions" weakened the kind of "supernatural" or "intelligent" faith that believers needed to "overcome" Satan. They warned that Satan inspired loved ones to make emotional appeals so that believers would not sacrifice their tithes and offerings in church (van Wyk 2014, 118–120). As the pastors repeatedly pointed out, tithes and sacrifices were foolproof Old Testament templates for producing miracles in believers' lives. By not following these templates, "nice" believers with "soft hearts" prevented the fullness of God's Kingdom from coming into being, and more dangerously, were helping Satan to defeat Christians (van Wyk 2014, 31, 63, 107, 187–188). It was for this reason that UCKG pastors encouraged believers to "fight" their families and the emotions that their intimacy engendered in order to devote their money to the church's campaigns and their failsafe results.

Such advice led many "strong believers" to confront their families head-on about their "demonic" demands and their suspected cooperation with the devil – either directly or

through the work of *sangomas* and the *amadlosi*. Phukile was certainly one of these believers. She fell out with her aunt on an almost daily basis and proudly told me about the occasions when she called out her aunt on suspected demonic activities, including her aunt's use of *muthi* (witchcraft substances) to entrap a now-reluctant former lover. On each of these occasions, Phukile challenged her aunt by telling her that "she will see" and that God would "show" her. She also promised that her aunt was opening doors for many bad things to happen to her. Such threats were so commonly made by UCKG believers that one pastor warned his congregants that they should not "inoculate" their families against the church. Other pastors did not take up his call and instead told congregants not to "fear" their families and their ancestors more than they feared God.

To face these "enemies", UCKG believers had to overcome local conventions that had once ensured "nice", polite interactions with social others. These conventions frequently involved the ways in which people dealt with the suspected witchcraft of their closest family members, neighbours, and friends, namely with silence and in secret. In contrast, UCKG believers such as Phukile openly fought witchcraft and named its suspected sources. Locally, such behaviour was outrageous because it flaunted the social conventions that made it possible to have a family and to love people in a context where witchcraft was a constant subtext in intimate relationships. In the process, UCKG members acted like veritable witches themselves, because it was only those who were assured of their own ability to withstand the powers of a real witch, and therefore had powers themselves, that would make such direct accusations (van Wyk 2014, 54–55, 153, 238–239; see also MacCarthy 2021: 660–674 on a similar change in the Trobriand Islands). I could not see how such suspicious behaviour and suspect attitudes could contribute to the harmonious relationships with her family that Phukile so urgently wanted.

Suspicions beyond the house

I soon realized that UCKG members' suspicions ranged far beyond their kin and their immediate "unbeliever" friends and neighbours. This was most readily visible in the ways that church members spoke about Durban's topographies of crime; nowhere was safe from uncontrollable and unpredictable violence. And while a certain portion of this suspicion mapped onto wider South African obsessions with illegality and crime (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004, 800–824), UCKG members believed that the unsafe world in which they lived had been shaped by the work of Satan and his demons. Their experiences of crime and violence were, they believed, but a small sample of the real world of evil. As such, they suspected that it was only because of the few flimsy spiritual defences they had in place that they were not faced with an all-out war.

For strong believers, this meant that they had to expect the worst from others and, as part of their spiritual war, be suspicious of everyone, even of other Christian churches. The UCKG openly denounced Catholics for worshipping false "idols", condemned traditionalist AICs for working with *amadlosi*, criticized mainstream churches for not participating in the spiritual war, and accused fellow PCCs of "wasting" words and energy on "emotional" and "useless" forms of worship (van Wyk 2014, 52–54). Pastors encouraged believers to publicly "curse" those who were obviously in cahoots with evil; gay men and women, *sangomas*, beggars who accepted their lot, people who were against the church, and anyone who did not conform to their ideals of "blessed" men and women of God.

UCKG believers' suspicions also extended beyond what they defined as obvious moral transgressions to encompass suspicions of people's (invisible) motivations. For instance, when I told Phukile about my battle with a tight-fisted landlord who refused to fix my leaking roof, she warned me, "Watch

out, he is hating you," a not-so subtle suggestion that the man might already be "working" against me and that more misfortune would come my way. A few weeks later, when the landlord's employee accidentally broke a lamp in my flat while washing the outside windows, Phukile asserted that it was no accident. She insisted that the man had done it on purpose and that my landlord had sent him to break things. Her social imagination was of a vengeful, spiteful social world that was out to get her – and people who shared her faith.

In the UCKG, pastors insisted that anyone could be "infected"[11] by demons, sometimes because they willingly participated in immoral activities such as smoking, drinking, promiscuous or homosexual sex, engagements with the ancestors, or consorting with those who "worked" with the ancestors. But such "defeats" were not always ascribed to an individual's moral weakness. Believers often explained that demons were akin to viruses and could spread through simple contact with others, through touching doctored doorknobs, bewitched cellphones, food, clothes, and "witch landmines" in public places. Demons also constantly "upgraded" their ability to breach human defences, a process in which humans were distinctly disadvantaged because their bodies were vulnerable and they had little help from invisible sources. As such, the human body leaked visible and invisible substances in a world where a wide range of rapacious spirits and evil people eagerly collected them to cause direct harm. Demonic possessions in the UCKG were thus virtually inevitable, no one was inviolable, and the world beyond the self was fundamentally predatory (van Wyk 2014, 116–140).

Like many other PCCs (Rio, MacCarthy and Blanes 2017, 3–6), the UCKG did not claim that their promised outcomes or exorcisms would ever be permanent, that the spiritual war had an end, or that their church would protect believers indefinitely from the work of demons or from witchcraft. But unlike many other PCCs, the UCKG held that strong Christians faced cumulative dangers as they fought demons in the spiritual war. The pastors often warned believers that each expelled demon would create a hole in the body's firmament for seven more demons to enter, and that the potential entry-points to a person's body were infinite. And while the pastors asked the Holy Spirit to cleanse and protect the bodies from which they had exorcized demons, believers knew that this protection did not last very long and that they had to upgrade their spiritual defences regularly. They also had to make use of the vials of "consecrated" holy water, oil, sand, and various objects, worn on the body, that would protect it (van Wyk 2014, 43). For many strong members, this pessimistic view of their likely protections against evil and the cumulative dangers they faced as they fought it was both plausible and locally familiar because it chimed with people's continued poverty, "bad luck", illness, and insecurity (van Wyk 2014, 235–236).

Demons in church

In church services, UCKG pastors frequently warned that even strong church members could be overcome by demonic forces. While still a member, Kushoni once tried to prove this reality to me by pointing out an old man who came to church regularly. In hushed tones she explained that he was caught planting *muthi* at the church entrance. While waiting for his blessings to arrive, he had become jealous of other people in church and wanted to reverse their blessings or cause harm to anyone else stepping over his *muthi*. Kushoni warned that I should not trust other people in church because many of them were only there to "find a gap" so that they could harm or bewitch others. Like other church members, Kushoni insisted that such people did not benefit directly from their actions but that they

[11] In the UCKG, demons could possess, infect, or infest people depending on the mode through which they gained entry to a person's body.

derived immense pleasure from the death and destruction that they sowed in other people's lives. And like Niehaus's (2001, 49) witches in the South African Lowveld, these individuals "do not merely succumb to their desires at times, but are completely dominated by their cravings for food, sex, money and revenge." African scholars have often referred to such suspicions as the fear of "witchcraft from below"; the fear that poor and marginalized people's jealousies inspired spiteful witchcraft against those who were more prosperous and successful (Geschiere 1997; Niehaus 2001).

But it was not only the jealous "unblessed" that believers had to fear in church. In the church's many exorcisms, pastors frequently warned onlookers that strong demons, annoyed by the UCKG's ability to undermine their work in the world, would spy on the church to "upgrade" their knowledge and technologies. These demons targeted strong believers precisely because they were so visible, because their blessings were on the way, and because their failures would dishearten other believers. And while these demons were looking for a "gap" in church, they disrupted services, tried to distract people from listening to the pastors, and prevented them from participating in the campaigns that would improve their lot. As Dingi explained, the church ushers were trained to look out for people thus possessed: those who disagreed with pastors, who showed signs of lethargy, who were distracted, or who experienced emotional outbursts. Unlike other Pentecostal churches, where people luxuriated in experiences of the Holy Spirit (Anderson 2001), in the UCKG those who felt unexplained warmth (or cold), elation, or dizziness were swiftly identified as people possessed. Dingi and her fellow ushers would haul these individuals to the front of the church where a pastor would exorcize the demon responsible.

Pastors and bishops in the UCKG were not immune to such suspicions. They often warned congregants that even men of God could be "overcome" by demons and that Satan targeted them precisely because they were so powerful in the spiritual war. While I never saw a pastor or bishop manifest demons in church, a number of scandals involving UCKG pastors were published in the South African media (van Wyk 2014, 74–81). For instance, in 2009, The Sowetan exposed a UCKG pastor who had swindled the Road Accident Fund out of millions of rands while working for the church (Mashaba 2009). In 2013, the investigative programme Special Assignment on SABC alleged that some pastors used their positions to "hide their involvement in drugs or money laundering" (Sowetan Live 2013), while a number of online publications exposed a pastor in Soweto as a rapist (Nicolaides 2019; Eyewitness News 2019). For the majority of church members who commented on these cases, this proved that the UCKG pastors were targeted by demons, or that already-infected people had entered the church to undermine its activities from the inside. Outside the UCKG, many rumours swirled about the UCKG and its pastors' occult attacks on hapless individuals and groups (van Wyk 2014, 146–149; cf. Newell 2007, 487). In this, outsiders recognized the UCKG's potential impact on the very fabric of their society and literally "spoke back" in rumours (van Wyk 2014, 241, see also 141–170).

Conclusion

In many senses, the UCKG's religious ethic of radical suspicion paralleled the imaginary that undergirded the experience of witchcraft in this part of the world. It was an imaginary that embraced suspicion at the very heart of sociality and that was at once pessimistic of and hopeful that believers could accomplish the fullness of God's Kingdom on earth. As such, this ethic exaggerated UCKG members' suspicions of other people, even in church, and contributed to the kind of spiritual insecurities (Ashforth 1998, 39–67; Ashforth 2005, 12–13) that marked a world plagued

by witchcraft. While this ethic was often destructive to intimate, family, and wider social relationships, and made people wary of the defences of their own bodies, it was paradoxically often aimed at re-establishing harmony and love in such relationships. In this, the UCKG offered spiritual fighters such as Phukile a space in which they were free from new social relationships that could potentially expose them to new forms of witchcraft; a space from which they could "work" on the world and remake it in a Christian image in which witchcraft was held at bay. However, in attempting to establish an ontological foothold from which they could tame Otherness, UCKG members were not the invincible and triumphant Christians we often encounter in PCC literature; every attempt and every failure to fight witchcraft scarred their bodies in ways that made them cumulatively vulnerable to it.

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