

## Gambling on God in post-apartheid South Africa: money and sacrifice in the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God

Abstract: When the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG), a Pentecostal-Charismatic church (PCC) of Brazilian origin, first came to South Africa in 1993, large numbers of marginalised black people streamed to the church to claim luxury houses situated in previously whites-only suburbs, BMW's, and Armani suits. The UCKG quickly became one of the fastest growing churches in South Africa. Many of its converts asserted that the UCKG, because of its recent introduction and foreign origins, was "ahead of the witches" and other malicious forces that controlled the flows of money and power in southern Africa. The church leadership underlined this sentiment by claiming that the UCKG defeated the apartheid demon and that visible politics and economics had nothing to do with the fall of the apartheid regime. With the introduction of the country's first national lottery in March 2000, large numbers of people again streamed to the UCKG to have their lottery stubs blessed and to get the numbers from the church's pastors. Unlike other PCCs, the UCKG paid little attention to the establishment of Christian fellowships, good deeds or to the experience of the Holy Spirit. Instead, the church focussed on the individual's need to establish a contract with God, sealed with large monetary sacrifices. Sometimes such sacrifices were equal to the cost of the "blessing" that God had to provide. In this regard, my interviewees asserted that money was 'slippery' but that God's obligation somehow anchored its value and channelled its flows. In this paper, I'll pay particular attention to the UCKG's sacrifice economy while questioning the usefulness of traditional economic analyses for the understanding of the ways in which people in South Africa think of and use money.

The Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) in Durban's Smith Street, like the 230 other branches of the church in South Africa, launched its January Campaign of Israel on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November 2004 during an all-night vigil at church. In the preceding weeks, the local pastors zealously advertised the Vigil in the church's six daily services as an event that would change the congregation's lives. It was an effective lure as the church's two thousand seats quickly filled up an hour before the service was due to start. Many people stood at the back and in the three corridors between the chairs. I gratefully accepted the seat that Khetha had saved for me and quickly sat down. Like every other service I attended at the UCKG over eighteen months, this service was populated by single members who came to the church alone. In a Cathedral that could seat two thousand people, I counted only three nuclear families and ten couples. A small number of women had brought a female friend to attend the "blessed service" but for the most part, people showed up on their own. There were no groups of people talking in the lobby or specially appointed assistants

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to greet newcomers. Inside, the members of the congregation exchanged polite, friendly greetings with people who sat next to them, or nodded, but seldom engaged in conversations. Khetha pointed out that the shrouded golden ark known as the “Sanctuary of the Tithers” used in the previous months’ tithing campaign was removed from the stage to make way for a four metre high photograph-poster. The poster depicted a bright blue, expansive lake with large palm trees on its banks and a crowd of people on its right shore. We later learnt that this was “The Fountain of Gideon”.

Just before eleven o’clock, Pastor Vladimir bounded onto the stage and greeted the UCKG members. After a few songs and strong prayers, he launched into his sermon, saying, “People in the Old Testament received much more than we do”. He listed the wonders that the “men of God” had experienced; Abraham became a father at one hundred years of age, Joshua stopped the sun, Moses parted the sea, David killed the giant Goliath and Gideon defeated an army with only three hundred men. These “men of God”, pastor Vladimir bellowed, received miracles, not jobs as cleaners or headache-cures. However, Pastor Vladimir continued, this “information” would not change your life. Neither would faith, as even “the devil has faith”. The secret lay in “acting” like the men of the Old Testament. These men were “revolted” and showed their rebellion against their “situations” in the forceful way that they spoke and acted. Even today, “those who are serious drive their own cars” while “nice”, “sweet” people “take the taxi”. Warming to his topic, Pastor Vladimir shouted, “Revolt against the spirit of sweetness *Basilwane* [Brethren]!”

I knew what was coming next because this was the most predictable and inevitable part of the UCKG services and the one thing that blazed through every campaign, every sermon, every publication and every television or radio advertisement for the church. *Basilwane*, shouted Pastor Vladimir, the UCKG doesn’t give its members bread but teaches them to “tithes and test God” so that they can “buy the bakery”. Indeed, the UCKG pastors were tasked with showing people how God could “materialise” their blessings through sacrifice, just as He did in the Old Testament. Thus Gideon defeated the Midianites with the “spirit of revolt” only after he overcame his “fear” of sacrifice. Fear caused Gideon to offer God a goat instead of sacrificing his father’s most prized possession, the “second bull”. However, once Gideon sacrificed this second bull, he could defeat his enemies with only three hundred men, three hundred trumpets and three hundred jars with fire inside them.

“Do you want to overcome the Mideanites in your life Basilwane?” shouted Pastor Vladimir. Two thousand congregants loudly confirmed that they wanted to overcome the Mideanites. Well, continued pastor Vladimir sagely, the only way to overcome fear and thus attain your blessings was to “place the second bull upon the altar”.

He then asked those who wanted to participate in the Campaign of Israel with a sacrifice of R200 000 to climb the altar and take their “jars of Gideon”. He pointed to a stack of dark brown carton boxes shaped like jars. Pastor Vladimir said that the bishop would take these jars, filled with the promised money and with one request from each faithful member to the fountain of Gideon in Israel where God would weed out the deserving from the undeserving requests. No one budged and I expected little action for some time. However, when he got to the R50 000 mark, one woman stood up and walked to the front. I sat up in surprise as I recognised the woman in the modest dress and carpet slippers as Mpofu, a domestic worker who earned about R800 per month. Pastor Vladimir switched the microphone off to ask her where she would get such a large amount, as she was evidently not “blessed” yet. I was sitting a few rows from the stage and listened with growing irritation to Mpofu’s interrogation. Mpofu defiantly told the pastor that her land claim<sup>1</sup> had been settled for R50 000. She wanted to sacrifice the whole amount so that God would bless her with a big house in Umhlanga Ridge, like the one she cleaned daily. Had she used the R50 000, she could have bought a modest two-bedroom house for cash in one of the government’s housing schemes. Pastor Vladimir seemed satisfied, switched the microphone back on and told Mpofu to take the “jar”. The congregation clapped their hands enthusiastically and shouted “Amen!” Pastor Vladimir asked the congregation to stretch their hands out to Mpofu while he asked God to protect her and keep her strong in her resolve. As she walked back to her seat, Pastor Vladimir shouted, “this woman will see her new house in January!” The congregation cheered wildly.

Four other people stood up to take jars at the R10 000 mark. I again sat up when I recognised Sisi, a nurse who worked in a state hospital. For her R10 000, she wanted a salary increase or a promotion in her job. At the time, a level 6 nurse earned R78 477 per year while a level 7 nurse earned about R100 000 per year. Sisi participated in both of that year’s Campaigns and in both campaigns sacrificed R10

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<sup>1</sup> In the post-apartheid era, the new South African government instituted a land claims process. People who lost their land during apartheid due to forceful relocations and violence could claim it back. Often, the claimants received cash settlements (Van Wyk 2003).

000, leaving her, after God's *promised* promotion with a mere R3 000 'gain'. Sisi was joined by another middle-aged female nurse who hoped that her R10 000 sacrifice would get her a promotion. An emaciated young woman with tell-tale cutaneous lesions on her skin wanted to be healthy again with her R10 000. The fourth person didn't want to say what he wanted because he was still "fighting" for that blessing. As the pastor continued with his Dutch auction and as growing numbers of people walked onto the stage to collect their promissory containers, more people asked for promotions, nice clothes, cars, houses and blessed jobs. Each time someone took one of the Jars of Gideon, pastor Vladimir reminded them that they were entering into a covenant with God, that this was not a "joke" and that they would be "robbing God" if they did not bring the money they pledged in January.

I knew that most of the people who took jars, unlike Mpofu, didn't have the money they were promising and that many of them would sell all their clothes or valuables, withdraw their meagre savings from the bank, sacrifice their groceries money, rent, mortgage payments or whole salaries while any shortfalls would be met by the greedy *mashonisas* (loan sharks). I could not watch as more people promised to bring what amounted to small fortunes and I left the church disturbed. When I later confessed to Khetha why I left, she told me that I was evidently "not in the same spirit" and that I needed to have that demon exorcised on the Friday, the day for exorcisms. Sibusiso's mother confided in me that she had the "same problem". She wanted to participate in the Campaign so that her business could grow but the problem was the "giving of the *imbuzi* [goat]" because "when it comes to money, the devil works very hard. We just have to overcome and give the *inkomo* [bull]" (*Mama Joy*, 27/11/2004). But it was pretty clear to me at least that Mrs Sibusiso and I didn't have the same problem. She was worried that she had the demon of Fear in her, I was angry at the obvious way in which the UCKG ruthlessly manipulated people's naïve belief in God to enrich themselves (this was two months into my research at the church). I wasn't alone in this initial assessment.

The media frequently published articles on the church's Campaigns, depicting them as elaborate ploys by a sinister corporation to obtain large sums of money from people who didn't know any better. The promises of riches were imaginary and due to their desperate economic circumstances, the poor were the most likely victims of the swindle. What made this "moneymaking scam" doubly appalling to such "unbelievers" was that it "used God" to legitimise it (Alvarez, Italiano & Riberio

2000; Epstein 1995; Jones 2001; Nascimento 1995; Treviño 2001b). In 2000, adding to the media indictments of the UCKG campaigns, the chairman of the South African Human Rights Commission (HRC) disclosed that his organisation was investigating the UCKG for financially exploiting the poor with “rituals that amount to forms of psychological conditioning”<sup>2</sup> (Anon 2000a: 6; Leeman 2000: 1).

After a few more months in the UCKG, I realised that there was two problems with the media’s (and my own initial) arguments. Firstly, the UCKG didn’t cater to a single social class or interest group. Although a large number of people in the church were very poor, the UCKG included many teachers, nurses and civil servants in its ranks as well as a magistrate and a handful of wealthy business people. These members, despite their university education and financial know-how, participated just as enthusiastically in the Campaigns and like Sisi, gave large portions of their income. Secondly, the church membership didn’t constitute a ‘community’ in any sense of the word and could thus not exert social pressure on individual members to participate.

As such, the UCKG in Durban didn’t have a choir, a band, a tearoom where people could socialise after the services, it had no Bible study groups, no job seekers’ centres, clinics, charitable committees, women’s groups or outreach programmes. Unlike other local churches, UCKG members didn’t congregate for festivals<sup>3</sup> or funerals, nor were weddings or baptisms celebrated as community affairs. With the notable exception of the announcement of the wedding of five pastors and one assistant (04/12/2004), the announcements from the pulpit only pertained to things like the Bishop’s visit, the church’s various campaigns and reminders of tithing Sundays. During my fieldwork, an assistant who had served in the church for eleven years died unexpectedly in a car accident but neither her death nor her funeral was announced in church<sup>4</sup>. I was later told that her funeral was held in another branch and that her family had to organise and pay for everything. Baptisms were equally the affair of those individuals directly involved. Of the two mass baptisms I attended (e.g. 08/08/2004), both occurred after the main service. The pastors didn’t invite anyone to

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<sup>2</sup> Under pressure from the church’s lawyers, the HRC soon retracted the statement and blamed the media for misquoting Dr Pityana (Anon 2000a: 6; Anon 2000c: 2).

<sup>3</sup> Other local churches often celebrated the founder and the congregation’s birthdays, the fulfilments of prophecies and *iladi* (lit. ladder, but refers to special occasion) (Mrs Cele, 20/04/2005).

<sup>4</sup> By chance, I only learnt about her death a week later during an interview with another assistant.

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stay on while the church's architecture precluded public participation or observation of the baptismal pool<sup>5</sup>.

Despite the church's six daily services, those that attended the UCKG didn't have a shared history or identity; in fact few people even told their families or friends that they went to the church (Khetha, 20/10/2004; Sbu, 22/05/2005). Most people attended the church alone, as on the night of the Vigil and carefully avoided the social intimacies that marked other church communities. As such, I often came across people whose membership overlapped by as much as eight years but who didn't know each other. Even the assistants, who generally knew each other's names, gossiped about other assistants<sup>6</sup>, wore uniforms and shared a general sense of purpose<sup>7</sup>, saw social intimacy in their ranks as polluting and dangerous (Thandi, 22/06/2005).

This lack of socialisation between UCKG members was complemented by an almost mechanical relationship between the congregation and its pastors. At any time there were between six and ten pastors at the Cathedral of Faith in Durban. All of them were there on short contracts of up to six months. Individual pastors never announced their departures while new arrivals quietly and seamlessly took over church services from their predecessors. The pastors' unpredictable and high turnover rate undermined any lasting loyalties or bonds with a congregation (See also Freston 2005: 41). This bond was further undermined by the minimal contact that the clergy had with the congregation outside the church's six daily services. They didn't make home visits or hold informal social occasions where they could mix with their flock. The clergy lived in apartments at the back of the church and returned to their quarters promptly after the services. Church members could approach the officiating pastor for a short window of ten minutes before and after each service. For more serious problems, they could make an appointment with a pastor through the church secretary. Very few people did.

In this church, as many pastors and strong members reiterated, you could only "trust God" (Pastor Vladimir, 05/09/2004; Thandi, 20/06/2005). However, the kind of relationship that the UCKG prescribed with God was devoid of the intimacy and emotional engagement common in other Pentecostal churches. Certainly, anyone who

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<sup>5</sup> The baptismal pool lay behind a shoulder-high wall on the stage. Sitting in the church facing the stage one could not see anything of the baptisms while the baptised left the stage through a back door to change into dry clothing in the bathrooms

<sup>6</sup> Gluckman (1963) claimed that gossip created group unity.

<sup>7</sup> They explained that they had to present a united front against the demons that attacked strong Christians on a daily basis.

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had a typically Pentecostal experience of the Holy Spirit, namely those who experienced feelings of warmth, elation or dizziness during the service, were summarily hauled to the front of the church to have the demons they ostensibly harboured exorcised. Dismissive of the “word informations” and emotions of other churches, the UCKG emphasised *actions*. These actions never referred to good deeds, charity, humility, or Christian fellowship but centred on an individual’s ability and willingness to tithe and sacrifice money, and only money, in church. Through their sacrifices and tithes individuals then established contracts or “covenants” with God whose fulfilment they had to “demand” by “crying out” to God so that He would fulfil His (contractual) promises to make them blessed. As such, the UCKG didn’t have praise and worship sessions or Bible-study groups and warned that the simple adoration of God and his angels was “useless” (Pastor Vander 12/08/2004; Pastor Vladimir 07/10/2004; Pastor Vladimir 11/11/ 2004). As the founder of the church, Bishop Macedo, asserted in his online message to members of the UCKG, “Intelligent faith is not emotional... [Our] Christian faith is not fanatic or religious; in order for us to achieve the results that we desire our faith must be intelligent” ([www.uckg.org.za](http://www.uckg.org.za), 16/03/2005, cf. Pastor Vladimir, 02/02/2005; Pastor Vladimir, 23/03/2005). Faith in the UCKG was thus calculated, “useful” and fundamentally geared towards actions and powerful words that could change the status quo.

John, a reluctant convert to the UCKG and an avid reader, was the only person I met in church that took exception to this focus. He explained the church’s Campaigns to me in the following terms<sup>8</sup>:

Once there was this place in New Guinea... they have a tribe there and they were called cargo cults... Then whenever an aeroplane went past the people went crazy. And that aeroplane every now and again would drop something when they came past and it would be gifts of some sort like, you know things that they have not seen and all that. And those people would wait day and night for those things to come. And our believers are the same. They only want cargo... [They say] Lord, I don’t want spiritual things. Just give me what I can see and what I can handle and what makes life easy for me. And that’s it (John, 27/07/ 2005).

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<sup>8</sup>John read about the Papua New Guinean ‘cults’ in a book by the Christian preacher John MacArthur. In *Charismatic Chaos* (1993), MacArthur takes the charismatic movement in the United States to task for its liberal interpretation of the Bible that allows for ‘bizarre’ Campaigns and mass hysteria also evident in cargo cults.

Cargo cults is of course a familiar trope in anthropology and one that informs much of the media's alarm over the UCKG's Campaigns; it calls up phantoms of irrationality, of people not fully modernised, of people ignorant of the forces and means of commodity production, and of people seduced by the spirit of the fetish (Pels 1998: 91-121) or by mindless consumption. But John's tirade against the "tribal" cargo-cultists in his midst was not informed by ideas of 'modernity' so much as by the outrage at the materialism of his fellow Christians. John then asserted that the UCKG was not a proper Christian church because of their exclusive emphasis on money instead of spirituality. However, he declared, at least here he was not bothered by the gossip, dressing competitions and politicking common in other churches (c.f. Makhosi, 11/04/2005; Persi, 23/08/2004). Since people didn't know him and left him alone, he could practice his faith "in peace" (John, 27/07/ 2005).

John's criticism of the UCKG conformed to a long tradition of analysis in anthropology that treated money as a corrupting and corrosive force (Parry & Bloch 1989: 2-4). Many anthropologists have, in this tradition, pointed at the insidious capacity of money and monetary exchange to dissolve traditional sacred values and social relationships. For example, Paul Bohannan's (1959) classic study of the Tiv focused on the impact that the introduction of colonial currency had on the dissolution of old moral spheres of exchange and value. He asserted that the Tiv's spheres of exchangeable goods were dissolved in favour of a single gauge, money, allowing the most sacred things to be measured against crude mass-produced products (see also Belasco 1980 on the Yoruba).

Apart from the damage that money's endless exchangeability wreaked on supposedly sacred pre-capitalist or pre-colonial systems of exchange, anthropologists often emphasised that its greatest impact was on the intimate village-like social relationships that animated these systems. The introduction of colonial money then impacted on people's ability to store and expend wealth in social payments such as bridewealth, funeral payments, social compensation and the purchase of titles and political offices (see Ekejiuba 1995: 133-161; Guyer 1995: 113-132; Manuh 1995: 188-202). For instance, in 19<sup>th</sup> century Southern Africa, the Tshidi's cattle supposedly acted as both currency and capital while embodying the "entire grammar of social relations". However, with the introduction of colonial capitalism, (or "modernity") the "goodly beasts" of traditional societies with their social, economic and symbolic values gave way to the "beastly goods" of capitalist-produced commodities and to

money (Comaroff & Comaroff 1990: 195-211). According to the Comaroffs (1990: 195-216), the Tshidi then invested great symbolic resources in cash as “cattle without legs” in order to “dam the corrosive flow of cash, to force it to bear the imprint of human relations”, a symbolic challenge to the uncompromising logic of a monetary economy (cf. Ferguson 1985: 647-674; Hutchinson 1996 on a similar effort to de-commoditise the coin among the Nuer). As such, money was analytically opposed to sociality while its accumulation was often tied to a shift from (traditional) dividuality to (modern) individuality (cf. ....). The analysis of money as a medium of social corruption then informed the Comaroffs’ (1990) “hot money”, Taussig (1980)’s “barren” money and Shipton (1989)’s “bitter money” (cf. Harms 1981).

At the heart of the supposed insidious qualities of money was a Western Christian tradition that drew sharp distinctions between the material and the spiritual ‘worlds’; between body-mind and matter-spirit (cf. Asad 1996; Cannell 2005; Magowan & Gordon 2001: 253). In this tradition, religion was conceived of as a personal, inwardly organising experience, focused on the mental subscription to a set of propositions about the invisible. Religion dealt with the sacred, with man’s higher faculties and with moral values. Money stood in direct opposition to this- its potentialities tempted the pious from the ascetic narrow path where the believer’s thoughts were turned to contemplate the spiritual to the path of the world where material acquisition, rationalism (see Weber 1930) and base pleasure preoccupied the unbeliever’s mind. This tradition informed the early missionaries’ reported horror at their pagan converts’ material expectations of conversion, and they regarded their converts’ residual “worldliness” as signs that their conversions to Christianity were not sincere (Etherington 2002: 422-439; Keane 1998: 13-34; Keane 2007; Meyer 2004: 467).

As Cannell (2005) and others have shown, anthropologists have not sufficiently problematised the Western Christian tradition that informed their analysis of Christianity (or other ‘religion’) in other parts of the world. As such, our ideas of ‘religion’ as a particular individualised, personal and spiritual orientation to the invisible is a historical product of discursive processes in the West and of changes within the Western Christian tradition itself (Asad 1982; 1993; Ruel 1982). As such, it doesn’t allow for engagements with the invisible that are more pragmatic and action-orientated (Smith 1998). Hence a number of anthropologists have exclaimed to me that the UCKG in its extreme utilitarian approach to God, with its concomitant lack of

community and emotion was not “properly Christian” or worse still, was not a church at all. But such voices have not found their way into print, or at least not in this format.

Instead, the literature is replete with examples of how Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs) such as the UCKG present a new stage in the development of Christianity. Unlike Christian movements that came before it and which ostensibly resisted capitalism (see Comaroff 1985; Devisch 1996; Taussig 1977; Meyer 1995<sup>9</sup>), PCCs then are said to transform individuals and communities in line with the demands of new forms of capitalism or the market (see Meyer 2003<sup>?</sup>; van Dijk). As such, late capitalism with its increased climate of risk (see Strange 1986 on casino capitalism<sup>10</sup>, Harvey 2005 on neoliberalism) has ostensibly led to an upsurge in magical notions of the world (Comaroff & Comaroff 1997; Meyer & Pels 2003; Ferme 2001; Geschiere 1997). Thus Weber (1930: 124)’s “[s]pecialists without spirit, [and] sensualists without heart” are disappearing as the modern world becomes infested with unexplained, enchanted and magical phenomena. For instance, the modern state’s representation, the modern economy’s commodification and modern society’s discipline can all be labelled magical (cf. Meyer & Pels 2003). It is in this context that PCCs are held up as both products and institutional producers of a new kind of ‘modernity’. In this role, they facilitate (or at least promise) economic empowerment for their adherents and rupture ideas about production, exchange and personhood (see Meyer; Maxwell, van Dijk) in line with the latest incarnations of capitalism. Thus when anthropologists describe instances where Born-Again Christians tithe, sacrifice, consume commodities and pray for wealth, they often frame these actions in terms of the capitalist market -or its magical incarnations (Comaroffs 2000: 312-316; Hasu 2006: 679-692; Maxwell 1998; Meyer 1995: 236-255; Meyer 1998).

For instance, authors have shown that PCCs not only allowed a space in which people could talk about the market and their desires for commodities in it, but also

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Meyer (1995: 236-255) explained Ghanaian Born-Again’s fascination with the devil, associated with non-Christian gods and Western luxury goods, against a background of difficult socio-economic conditions. Stories about the devil in church consequently entailed a critique of the capitalist economy and an opportunity to fantasise about things people could not afford but nevertheless desired.

<sup>10</sup> Numerous authors reasoned that the “law of insurance” which acted as the organising principle of the Keynesian Welfare State is decomposing, and is being replaced by the “law of lottery” as the principle regulatory mechanism of the neo-liberal capitalist state (Moran 1997; Neary and Taylor 1998; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000).

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framed the economic promises of modernity as promises of the Christian God (Maxwell 1998; Meyer 1998; Van Dijk 1999). They showed how PCCs naturalised and even shaped the desire for luxury commodities in “workshops” devoted to personal grooming, fashion and interior decorating (e.g. Mate 2002: 551-556). Similarly, PCCs were said to transform Africans through the mechanism of conversion into *individuals* better able to opt into the global economic order from which they had been excluded and to accumulate the goods of that order. Anthropologists also emphasised the skill with which PCCs created new or modern forms of sociality that supported and moulded the individual and his/ her modern aspirations (van Wyk 2007).

The Comaroffs (1999; 2000) on the other hand didn't just show the complicity of PCCs to processes of late capitalism but asserted that these churches were spawned by the very conditions of “millennial capitalism”. People apparently saw mysterious forces intervening in the production of value, diverting it to a small elect and consequently attributed to these forces all their frustrations and despair at being excluded from the promise of prosperity. Such disenfranchised people then strove to create wealth from nothing by employing magical means and by trying to put a stop to those that did so by misbegotten means. According to the Comaroffs (2000: 312-316), the UCKG and other new PCCs then exemplified the consumer-cult and prosperity gospels that have subsequently come into being to achieve these ends.

What is problematic about these interpretations of PCCs is that they are institutionally over-determined (especially in the context of the UCKG's almost total lack of sociality). They rely heavily on the social mechanism of intimate, village-like church communities to transform individual, (un-modern) converts into disciples of late capitalism. As van Binsbergen (1997) pointed out, this is highly problematic because of the demographic scale of the people involved in PCCs, the “plurality of cultural and class perspectives, of language, [and] of meaning”. It is thus surprising that anthropologists could discuss mega-churches in terms of convergence and consensus “as if we were not dealing with a complex, internally extremely fragmented and heterogeneous urban context, but with an African village of the type studied by classic anthropology” (van Binsbergen 1997). What such perspectives also don't allow for is that Christian converts are already transformed by the conditions of late capitalism; by its changing labour market, by the government's inability to provide adequate social and health care, by the conflicts that a wide disparity in incomes engendered and by

the closures and exclusions of this new economy. Thus people's contracts with God in the UCKG were 'modern'; they longed for Armani suits, BMWs, big houses, jobs as directors of large financial companies, health and so on. As a set of linked ideas, practices and meanings, the UCKG members' sacrificial giving and tithing were not due to the transformative powers of the UCKG institution. Indeed, these ideas and practices surrendered with little resistance to the UCKG members' old understandings of the world, things and spirits in it.

As such, the UCKG members' perception of being in the world precluded the possibility of the transformed, converted, self-contained individual of PCC studies. UCKG members and township residents experienced the world as a place where the visible and the invisible mutually interacted on each other, where people invisibly leaked substances that could open them up to untold dangers and where cause and effect were often not clear-cut. It was a spirited universe in which all illness (apart from the common cold and a few other 'natural' diseases), misfortune, hardship and accidents were *caused* by unbalanced relationships with people (dead or alive) or the environment and by powerful people/spirits. Bad things didn't just happen, they were willed by people/spirits with supra-natural, secret knowledge. On the flipside, powerful people/spirits could influence the flow of health, wealth and happiness through the skilful manipulation of invisible forces (cf. Geschiere 1997). But this manipulation was fundamentally predicated on access to 'secret' types of knowledge. In this regard, your life was shaped by the degree to which you could harness a universal neutral power and effectively block the workings of witches and jealous relatives. Fortune and misfortune were thus continuously manipulated.

People tended to assess their lives in terms of the precarious balance they maintained between the various invisible forces that were working towards their downfall and those they tried to access to get them ahead. Once this balance was disturbed, one had to right it at the point where it had gone wrong or risk losing everything. My interviewees thus spoke about inevitable patterns that followed their inability to amend such a tear in the fabric of their lives. Nothing but the actual reparation of the point of imbalance would change the inevitable decline into dire poverty, disease and death. When I suggested to Ketha and some of my other interviewees that winning the Lottery would surely halt this pattern, they merely replied that the money would either inexplicably disappear or you would die before it

was paid out. Money, houses, commodities and jobs were similarly vulnerable to disappearances, to invisible flames and to the ravages of invisible ‘eaters’.

People in my research area were acutely aware that the secret malicious thoughts, actions and talk of both close kin and complete strangers made all health, wealth and happiness fleeting and made them susceptible to constant invisible attacks. They thus put a premium on the penetration of the presumed secrecy of others and on the revelation of hidden sources of evil. To this end, they often visited *izangoma*, or traditional healers whenever they faced any kind of misfortune. Many people also visited prophets, old and new churches in order to harness some of the powerful knowledge that these people held to help them stay ahead of the witches, demons and other dark forces who were constantly “upgrading themselves” (Miss Hadebe 18/03/2005). This ontological vulnerability was also the reason why many Christians I talked to in the townships were, as Thandi put it, “Born Again and again and again”. In Durban, it was striking to note how often people changed churches, especially if they attended Evangelical and new Pentecostal churches<sup>11</sup>. On average, my interviewees stated that they attended each church for about two years before complaining that there was too much witchcraft in the church, that they fell out with other churchgoers or that the church “stopped working”. For my interviewees then, the power of the Holy Spirit, invoked to combat evil, was not of a different order than the supernatural powers of witches (contra Meyer 1999<sup>12</sup>). People were thus very concerned with the ability of different pastors to channel the Holy Spirit effectively, especially in the wake of widespread money- and sex scandals connected to famous charismatic leaders.

Despite changing churches constantly, none of my interviewees ever questioned the Christian God’s ability to affect change in their lives and blamed

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<sup>11</sup> New churches and prayer groups were constantly cropping up all over the city, some in people’s front rooms, others in school halls, garages, backyards and some sharing church buildings with other congregations of different denominations.

<sup>12</sup> Meyer (1999) asserted that Pentecostal churches in Ghana attracted members because they successfully contained witchcraft through the exorcism of demons. According to Meyer, Ghanaians believed that the power of the Holy Spirit, invoked to combat evil, was of a different order than the supernatural powers of witches. Yet in a later book, she convincingly argued that Pentecostalism’s increasing popularity stemmed from the fact that it tied into historically generated, local understandings of Christianity, which, despite a declared dislike of non-Christian religious practices, were much closer to Ewe religion than missionary Christianity (cf. Meyer 2000). The argument that the Pentecostals worked outside the networks that tied politicians and ‘traditional’ healers to witchcraft was further diminished in the 1999 article when Meyer noted that Pentecostal preachers accused each other of witchcraft while their ostentatious wealth made others suspect them of using witchcraft (Meyer 1999; cf. Ciekawy & Geschiere 1998: 8).

individual churches and pastors for not understanding or following God's instructions on how to go about this difficult task. The belief in the Christian God and his efficacy was, due to more than two hundred years of missionary work in the area, pervasive. But so was the belief that Satan, witches, evil spirits and demons were trying to undermine God's plans for humans (see Meyer 1999) and that they too were upgrading. Thus being Born Again in Durban was seldom a final or once-off solution for the ways in which a persistent, adapting enemy constantly attacked people, and especially people of God.

It was in this context that the UCKG garnered a large following when it first came to South Africa- the church pastors claimed that the national demon of apartheid was not vanquished "due to Mandela signing those papers or you going to the streets" but to the arrival and work of the UCKG from 1992 (Pastor Vander, 12/08/2004; cf. Pastor Vladimir, 02/12/2004). The UCKG pastors confidently told their congregations that they had a better grasp of the reasons why people were poor, ill, lonely and unhappy- they were infested by various demons who worked on many levels to destroy God's children, sometimes in the guise of good people. As such, the UCKG labelled the *amadlosi* (ancestor spirits) and those that worked with them as demonic (e.g. Bishop Crivella, 16/01/2005). The pastors repeatedly warned the congregation that *izangoma* (diviners/ healers) facilitated the demons' entrance into unsuspecting people's bodies (and lives) (Crivella 1999: 23-104). They framed the *izangoma* as willing and devious partners of the devil and warned the congregation to avoid them and anything that had to do with the *amadlosi* at all cost (many local Pentecostal churches had prophets who used the *amadlosi* to talk to God/Jesus).

The UCKG's demonisation of 'tradition' is a common theme in PCCs but in this church, the demons took on a slightly more insidious quality. Demons in the UCKG then were said to work on their own volition (as in other churches) and tried to infect people by tempting them to do immoral things. But more than this, demons could also be sent by your enemies, they could be passed on like viruses from one body to another, they could reside in bewitched things and one merely had to step over, inhale or unwittingly touch the '*muthi* (witchcraft substance/ medicine) to be infected. Bishop Crivella explained how easily people became infected by demons, "*Basilwane* [brethren], you go walking on the streets and then you have these thoughts of ....the devil and then *Basilwane* those thoughts ... becomes a feeling. It is something that was outside, but now it is *phakathi* [inside]. You feel, you can sense

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[them]”. Thus, in the UCKG, people could be infected by demons through no fault of their own but due to the evil machinations of people around them and due to the upgrading that Satan’s army was continuously subject to. In this regard, the UCKG did not subscribe to the personal moral causality of other Christian churches in the area. Instead, they paid a lot of attention to incompletely controlled forces and the politics of their deployment in material things and geographical space. The church thus stressed that demons were constantly “upgrading” in the “War against God” and that this constant threat could not be combated by the single technology of being Born Again. The UCKG also warned that even “strong men and women of God” could be infected by demons, not because they were weakened in their resolve or faith but because of the ability of Satan’s army to overcome our strongest defences. It was for this reason that the UCKG pastors asserted that praising and worshipping God was “useless” and that spending time on good deeds and Christian fellowship could not change the situation of a “miserable” Christian. Instead, strong Christians had to battle the Kingdom of Satan with the technologies of God; by having demons exorcised from their bodies, by using strong prayer on a daily basis, by tithing, sacrificing, occasional fasting and going to church.

As a technology to overcome Satan, tithing and sacrificing money was especially effective in the UCKG because these technologies forced God, through a Biblical contract, to become directly involved in an individual’s fight. As such, God’s power always trumped that of Satan but He didn’t always get involved in the earthly battles. Bishop Macedo, in a church publication called *Change your Life through Sacrifice*, explained this technology as follows:

[T]he fact is that giving and receiving has always been present in the relationship between man and God...This means any and every achievement comes from sacrifice. Every achievement in life has the price of sacrifice. Everything has its price. If the objective I want to achieve is high, then high will also be the price of the sacrifice I will have to pay. The greater the conquest, the greater the sacrifice to conquer it... That is why great victories are conquered only by men of God, courageous, firm and determined (Macedo 2003: 70-71).

As the pastors often remarked during the Campaigns of Israel, the worth of your sacrifice was not solely measured by its quantity but by its quality. It was not the money itself that made God react, but the pain it caused you to sacrifice money you worked or suffered for. As Zethu affirmed, “because if I never felt any pain I can’t cry out to God. But if I made a sacrifice and I felt the pain I have the right to cry out” (05/07/2005). To “cry out”, was different from a mere demand from God and was

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“expressed only in a situation of extreme despair. One need[ed] to reach the bottom of the pit or get to the limit of pain and affliction in order to be able to cry out” (Bishop Macedo [www.uckg.org.za](http://www.uckg.org.za), 16/03/2005).

There was considerable disagreement among UCKG members about the kinds of money that would make God react to a sacrifice. For instance, Khetha, after including her child support grant and all the money she made in the months leading up to the January Campaign, was still a few hundred Rands short of her covenant with God and decided to go to the *mashonisas* (loan sharks) to get the rest of the money. They charged her 40% interest per month on the money she borrowed and made certain that Khetha was in debt for months to come. Although Khetha’s story was not uncommon, not all members of the UCKG agreed on the wisdom of her sacrifice. I presented her story as a hypothetical example to many of my interviewees in the following months and asked them to comment on it. Thandi criticized Khetha and other mothers who sacrificed their children’s grant money for not using “intelligent faith”. She said that the grant money was not intended for Khetha’s use and was therefore not hers to sacrifice. The inclusion of this money “sabotaged” her sacrifice and made it useless. Thandi speculated that Khetha would in the end blame God because her covenant would not be honoured. This was not intelligent faith (Thandi, 13/06/2005; Thandi 20/06/2005). Mrs Sebenzi said that the inclusion of the *mashonisa*’s money spoiled her sacrifice because Khetha didn’t “sweat for that money”. One could thus only sacrifice money that belonged to you and that you worked for (13/06/2005). Other interviewees concentrated on the wisdom of Khetha’s actions. Kwanamuhla remarked that Khetha should have kept some money so that she could continue to sell muffins because her total dependence on God was “forcing Him” and might irritate Him. However, Kwanamuhla was roundly criticised by her friend for having “small faith” (06/07/2005). Selina, an assistant, declared that Khetha had acted with strong faith because she sacrificed in Jesus’ name. God gave His children the authority to “rebuke the demons” (in Jesus’ name) because He had made the biggest sacrifice of all. However, the fulfilment of your request was still dependent on God’s will and on the strength of your daily fight against the demons. She was thus unwilling to venture a guess as to whether Khetha’s request would be fulfilled (Assistant Selena, 17/06/2005).

But the pain of sacrifice and its binding power on God only explained some of the Campaign of Israel’s participants’ sacrifices. For instance, Sisi explained that

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sacrificing her family's groceries money for a few months would not make them "starve" and that they still had tea and bread at home. In her all-female household she explained her sacrifice in terms of a "small inconvenience" and hoped that their suffering would soon lead to better lives for them all (20/06/2005). So her sacrifice fits the mould; she suffered so that God would work a miracle in her life.

Mpofu however was a slightly different case. Had she used the money she sacrificed in the Campaign, she could have bought a two-bedroom house for cash. The same was true of people who sacrificed money to get loans for cars and other luxury commodities; their sacrifices were usually equal to the down-payments on substantial loans. On one occasion Zinhle explained the blessing of a car loan to me thus, "If you want a car and you don't have a way to get it and sometimes you have a little money [but what] you have is not enough. And you just pray to God to soften those people's hearts ...so God himself He will touch the heart of the company and when you go there again with using your faith, God will touch his heart and you will get the car" (05/07/2005). For Zinhle then, getting the company to give you a loan was the miracle. Zethu on the other hand said that car loans were not blessings but "*umshwabadeli*"; things you eat up, consume and eat greedily. Loans thus worked against blessings because they consumed money. In her view, blessings were things that you "struggled to get ... and then finally it happens" (Assistant Zethu, 05/07/2005). She was in full-time employment and could easily get a loan for a car but due to the recent property boom<sup>13</sup>, very few people could afford to buy a small flat in Durban, while larger family homes were largely out of reach. For her then, getting a mortgage was a blessing. The difference between Zinhle and Zethu was thus a difference of accessibility to financial services. Most working people could afford the repayment on a small car or loan while many people who had never worked in the formal economy<sup>14</sup> or who didn't have bank accounts, thought that any loan was a blessing. One of the assistants explained this difference in opinion on what constituted blessings to me, saying that blessings were things you "fought for" but could not get on your own (Assistant Patience, 05/07/2005).

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<sup>13</sup> In the last three years, property prices in South Africa skyrocketed, making it impossible to find a two-bedroom house in Durban for less than R500 000. The repayments on such a bond would amount to about R6 000 per month, 100% more than the average income of a regular office worker. The repayments on a new Volkswagen Golf on the other hand would be in the region of R800 per month.

<sup>14</sup> I'm using the economists' division between the formal and the informal economy because this was used by the commercial banks to determine a person's eligibility for a loan or a bank account.

But Mpofu didn't need to "fight" for a home loan, she could've easily just bought it with cash. The thing is however that Mpofu's world was 'slippery', and that she felt that she didn't have control of the intersections between the visible and the invisible. She was certain that a house bought on the open market would disappear or would be invisibly consumed. By 'buying' the house from God himself, Mpofu was certain that it, once materialised, would be anchored and inviolable from invisible attacks. It was a rational decision for someone who believed practically that God did not only exist but that He was all-powerful and that she could somehow access this power (Smith 1998).

### Conclusion

It is in the context of people in Durban's particular understandings of the nature of the world and of the practical engagement of religion in that world which problematises economic readings of their actions within the UCKG. According to the literature, the force of the UCKG (and other PCCs) and the reason for its phenomenal growth lie partly in the church's ability to embody the open-endedness of global networks of flow while at the same time offering closure and stability. In the latter regard, a stable collection of narrative formula and well-organised social structures supposedly offer the individual an anchor in the frightening sea of neoliberal possibilities and frustrations. The UCKG's prosperity gospel also projects a new vision upon the world that responds to the processes and promises of 'modernity'. In the church then, people are transformed to become more flexible and adaptable (through the process of conversion) to the flows of a risky new economy. This participation is, however premised on the radical break that converts have to make with their families and friends (Cesar 2001; Corten & Marshall-Fratani 2001; Freston 2001; Oro 2001).

As I've shown in this paper, people who went to the UCKG were not transformed to take part in the neoliberal "casino economy" by an institution which stood outside it. Neither did they receive sanctuary from the frightening world in which they found themselves. The UCKG, in its emphasis on technologies that could direct the flow of goods and power, merely conformed to old ideas of the world. (the UCKG in its newness then was more powerful because it supposedly had access to new forms of power and secret knowledge). These ideas then didn't allow for the possibility of a "casino economy" where chance was an automatic occurrence. Risk was intimately tied to power, people and morality. Furthermore, in this conception of

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the world and forces in it, one couldn't separate out economic things from spiritual things; the dualism of the western Christian tradition had little meaning. Didn't explain people's actions in church.