African Indigenous Churches as a Source of Socio-political Transformation in South Africa

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This paper will explore the anthropology of African indigenous churches, particularly as expressed in healing rituals at St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church, located in the township Guguletu in Cape Town, South Africa. Healing rituals are a central avenue through which a growing number of black South Africans actively participate in a religion of the oppressed as a cultural system within the indigenous churches. These rituals deserve careful examination because they are an agent of political resistance appropriated by the poorest of the poor in South African society.

The data for this paper were collected in the context of the socio-political events of 1991, immediately following Nelson Mandela's release from prison. The period after his release was a time of rapid transition in the country. This period of transition involved myriad contradictions that affected the daily lives of black South Africans. Poverty and violence were, and continue to be, the order of the day. Despite the repeal of Apartheid laws and the all party convention for a democratic South Africa beginning in December, 1991, the quality of life was not shifting in any dramatic way for most black South Africans. In fact, a "third force" operated to destabilize the possibility of black rule despite the all white affirmative referendum vote in March 1992.

The research questions that I posed during this time of rapid transition in South Africa were: What role do healing rituals, as exhibited in St. John's Apostolic Faith Mission Church - Guguletu, play in the lives of members during this period of contradiction and rapid change in the political life of South Africa? Are healing rituals symbolic forms that assuage some of the contradictions in the lives of poor black South Africans? These contradictions are indicative of an "in between time" or a period of

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1. Some of the contradictions included the taxi war that was taking place in the townships in Cape Town between Laguna, an African run company, and Webta, financed by white businessmen; school children were not going to school because of the violence in the townships; and poorly paid migrant workers lived in the townships, at great distances from their families.

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liminality. Liminality, as reflected in South Africa, is a period betwixt and between: balance and chaos; self-determination and authoritarian rule; equality of rights, opportunity, fair treatment and inequality, barriers and injustice. Essentially, it is a stage betwixt and between symmetry and asymmetry. Liminality in South Africa is a period of extreme ambiguity, uncertainty and suffering for persons who are disenfranchised.

In light of this cultural history and within the context of these contradictions, I explored how religion, as expressed through healing rituals, functioned as a symbolic form integrating the means by which St. John's members constructed a form of political resistance to macro-level structures embedded in an Apartheid culture. Does the incorporation of indigenous African religious practices within a Christian context, as expressed in healing rituals, represent a type of health care system that successfully functions outside the conventional realm of hospitals and doctors' offices? If this is so, can we conclude that St. John's and other indigenous churches form a cultural system of political resistance and hence, sources for socio-political transformation in South Africa?

In order to construct a definitive answer to these questions, I utilize Clifford Geertz's notion of religion as a cultural system to examine how micro-level social relations, as reflected in the healing rituals of St. John's, impact and are impacted by macro-level political, social and economic structures and struggles in the Republic of South Africa. Geertz posits that religion plays a significant role in the social life of people by functioning as a symbolic form which integrates the way that they construct their lives. Thus, the interpersonal social relations of poor black South Africans are examined with the intent of discovering how they employ healing rituals as a force for reorienting their social reality, a material world that is permeated with the legacy of Apartheid, and symbolically transforming it into a life-enhancing reality. The transformations are necessary, even during the present post-Apartheid era, because the insidious effects of Apartheid ideology and practice still perpetuate structures that diminish human life.

Social Ritual and Health: A Theoretical Overview

My starting points of theoretical intersection are health and social ritual. In this regard, Steven Feierman is taken seriously when he makes a decisive point that:


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the history of therapeutics must . . . take into account all the forces which shape local networks, in other words everything which affects community and domestic organization. The history of health care is inseparable from the total history of communal organization of the economy.4

In this examination, relations between patients and healers are approached within the context of culturally constructed reality. Carolyn Sargent suggests that in their shared context, social participants have common understandings of illness and healing. Decisions regarding therapeutic choices and compliance with prescribed regimes are affected by the extent to which patients and healers share a common view of illness and healing.5

This study suggests that the rituals of healing at St. John's are a response to "pollution" which is viewed as a socio-cultural force that increases susceptibility to illness, and creates misfortune and poor luck.6 Pollution is associated with birth and death, the events in the life cycle that are viewed as the great mysteries of existence. Rituals of healing are thus intimately linked to the supernatural and must be understood in that context.

South African anthropologist Harriet Ngubane, who did fieldwork among the Zulu on healing and ritual, suggests that there is a "this world and other world" belief system; that is, there exists the present world in which human beings live, and there also exists the "other world," which is the place where people who have moved through the passage of death enter a new state of beingness, as ancestor or spirit.7 The concepts of "this" world and the "other" world have an overlapping area that is characterized by danger and marginality.8 The persistent violence leading up to multi-racial elections has meant that most black South Africans have lived, in the overlapping area between "this world" and "the other world."

Victor Turner further suggests that people's perceptions of the activity

of supernatural forces coincide with the ritual action they perform. The way people know things, how they feel and what they do, are all intimately linked to ritual activity. According to Turner, while the cognitive, affective and volitional are all essential, they are rarely manifested in their absolute form. These elements are, in the words of Turner, "...only comprehensible as lived experience." Turner's interpretation of ritual behavior in relationship to belief in God takes seriously cultural context, personal experience, symbolic roles and patterns of human transactions which depict an accessibility to what lies ahead. These factors must be included in an examination of the anthropology and ritual healing activity of St. John's. Essentially, in the South African context and elsewhere, ritual healing is the enactment of people's beliefs. As a religious act, healing ritual is the drama human beings perform to build a relationship between themselves and their beliefs. Ritual expression at St. John's was usually associated with moral problems, social conflict and the healing of illness. Ritual was a means by which St. John's members came to terms with that which was out of order. Thus, it was a means to bond the community, resolve conflict, and ultimately improve health and the quality of life.

Ritual Healing at St. Johns

There are two central constructs in St. John's world view, namely, the role of the Holy Spirit (umoya) and the service of healing. These constructs give us a view of the way in which members responded to supernatural entities and how association with the spirit world ultimately augmented members' participation in socio-political acts.

The Holy Spirit (umoya)

Umoya (Spirit) was the means through which the work of healing took place at St. John's. It provided a spiritual and communal bond among St. John's members. Indeed, the church and all aspects of its life were empowered through umoya. Umoya as a spiritual power usually took possession of persons during worship services. Possession by umoya was spontaneous and unpredictable. It is difficult to describe the phenomena precisely because people responded to it in several ways. For example, during a particular morning worship a member named Ndsilibe was suddenly possessed by umoya and began to jump up and down

10. Ibid.
rhythmically as a hymn was being sung. He moved throughout the church while in this possessed state. His eyes were closed and his arms moved in a fashion that gave him balance. Occasionally he cried out an ecstatic utterance. When the hymn came to a close, the pace of his jumping slowed down and he walked around to calm himself. When he was ready, he returned to a pew, quite exhausted.

The outward signs of possession by umoya had various expressions. Some persons in a possessed state made jerky movements with their arms and legs. Others bent over and became completely limp. Still others became stiff. All usually showed great emotion that could not easily be contained in a quiet or serene manner. One woman commented on the inner feelings that were a part of possession saying, "No matter what your problem may be, if you have been possessed by the Holy Spirit, you are always safe." When asked whether or not she had been possessed, she responded, "I don't know, but I am always safe."

During structured interviews, St. John's members were asked about the Holy Spirit and whether they had ever been possessed by it. Mrs. Mazibula responded:

I know that there is a Holy Spirit (umoya). Everything we do, we do through the Holy Spirit. When we are possessed by the Holy Spirit,... we dance. You can't dance if you don't feel the Holy Spirit on you. We also do some other things. For instance, people tell you, you did something but, you didn't know. It's there where we see everything, while we're in the Holy Spirit.

In another interview, when I asked Mr. and Mrs. Mjoli about rituals used in the church, they responded by talking about umoya.

If a person is just listening to a song and the song satisfies that person—sometimes you will see that person jumping but, the person doesn't know this. You might think that person is mad. And, that is the Spirit (umoya) in that person. He's working through a person.

A final comment on umoya came in St. John's priest/healer, Reverend Xaba's, words of welcome to me during a worship service, held on 30 June 1991. Since this was only my second time to worship at St. John's, he prepared me for seeing members possessed by the Holy Spirit by saying:

We thank our visitor for coming to this place. We thank her a lot. The Bible tells us that receiving visitors is receiving the angels of heaven. We welcome you wholeheartedly. We want to apologize that you did not understand
what is happening here. When the Spirit (umoya) comes upon us, we jump. You should not be amazed.

These comments from Reverend Xaba and members of St. John's suggest that the Holy Spirit was vital to the life of the church. Reference to dancing and jumping were the means by which people knew that a person had been possessed. Moreover, when the Spirit came upon a person, he/she may not have known what transpired. This was why others who witnessed the possession of a member shared with the person what had happened. Some people experienced a "lightness" in their bodies. Mrs. Mjoli said the following about being possessed:

...once I have been possessed by the Holy Spirit; I feel myself very, very light. The way you see me when I'm dancing—you won't believe I'm an old lady....

While umoya may have possessed a particular individual, the possession usually took place in the context of the worshiping community. The dance that usually accompanied the possession of a person by umoya occurred while the congregation was singing. When people did the dance, there was hand clapping and the entire congregation experienced a shift in energy as song and movement created an ecstatic state that penetrated the moment. The feelings that were evoked during these moments were often described as "a lightness" or "I did not know what I was doing." Possession occurring in one person sometimes set off a chain reaction where others were possessed as well. Possession by the Holy Spirit had the effect of saturating the members with an experience that could not be ignored. While everyone present may not have been possessed, everyone present was aware of a shift in the modality of the ritual moment. Indeed, what occurred could be called a liminal state in which emotions, sensations, and time were suspended.

In addition to the holy dance, umoya makes it possible for people to speak in tongues, have visions, prophesy and heal. Umoya "inspires, reveals, and fills with power and spiritual gifts."11 James Kiernan suggests that umoya is associated with the movement of air and breath.12 It is often

invoked to cool down the over-heated body of a sick person. Abolom Vilakazi suggests that umoya's power (amandla) is central to life and is a part of one's being. He writes that:

the spirit, breath or air...umoya, is the vital force of the body.... This spirit...also gives strength. A tired person halts in his [sic] exertion to "take air" ...athathe umoya, which is the same as "to take strength."

The strength that umoya gives is multiplied when people gather communally. The feeling that accompanied the presence of umoya kept St. John's members bonded together against the difficulties of life. Indeed, the feeling evoked in people as a result of an encounter with umoya was one of the factors that kept them involved in the church. Bonding was displayed among members as they cared for those who had been possessed during the service. When the Holy Spirit possessed one person during a worship service, the experience impacted the entire worshiping community. The shared moments of the emotion of being in the presence of one who was possessed was an additional adhesive that bonded the community. At the conclusion of the service others told the person who had been possessed what happened. That person would face the reality that he/she had participated in a drama in which a powerful force put him/her in an altered state of consciousness. The result of such an experience was usually a validation of the power of the Holy Spirit and a strengthening of belief in the Spirit by the individual and the collective worshiping community. St. John's member, Thobeka, commenting on what happened after people were possessed said, "If you have been possessed by the Holy Spirit, you help other people." That an encounter with the Holy Spirit kept people involved in the church is further demonstrated by Nonceba's comment,

Once I joined St. John's, it is the Holy Spirit that makes me to know the word of God and to understand what's going on in the church. I think that this church provides the only way to live.

The Service of Healing

The climax of every Sunday morning worship service at St. John's was a healing ritual. After the sermon, Reverend Xaba usually said, "It is time


to prepare to go to the lake (ichibi)." To "go to the lake" was symbolic language that signified the commencement of the ritual drama of healing. The drama unfolded in the following way. First, a member, usually a woman, began to sing a hymn called, "Seteng Seliba Samadi" which means "There is a Lake of Blood." The words are:

Seteng Seliba samadi
Aletareng ya tefelo
'liba se eleng setlhare
Maatla a sona
ke bophelo

There is a lake of blood
in the altar of atonement.
The lake which is a medicine
the power of which is life.

Esale ke i tlhatswa teng
Kentse ke bina topollo
ke be ke kene Moreneng
Madulong a dinyakallo

I have been washing myself there,
Singing the song of salvation
until I enter to the Lord
in the places of joy.

Mothhang o relo kopana
khanyeng le bohle baa
hlotse."n
babinang pel'a konyana
rato le ba lopollotseng

One day we shall meet
in the light; glory with all
those who conquered.
Those who sing in front of the lamb,
About the love that redeemed them.

Bare Amen Haleluhah
Hoboraro boo teroneng
Ntate le Mona le Maya

They say, Amen Hallelujah
To the Three in the throne
Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Let this song be sung eternally.

The words of the hymn are rich in symbolic meaning. An exegesis of the hymn text suggests that the lake of blood was an altar of atonement which signified Jesus' sacrificial death. The lake of blood was medicine that gave power to life. Thus, the blood of Jesus was metaphorically a healing medicine that was symbolized by the blessed water members drank.

While this hymn was sung, the sanctuary was transformed to represent a lake that metaphorically represented the pool of healing where Jesus cured a man who had been an invalid for many years. The lake, which was called Bethesda in the New Testament book John 3, signified that persons who wanted to be healed would have the opportunity to drink blessed water and be prayed for during the service. A large spotlessly clean white cloth that was 6 feet in length and 3 feet in width, with blue borders, was raised above the center aisle. The aisle had a cross outlined in white tiles against a solid blue background. The blue and white tiles had been
scrubbed until they shined. The aisle was under a fluorescent light bulb that was also shaped as a cross. Thus, the blue and white canopy was completely surrounded by the symbol of the cross.

Two members brought water in a large container to the front of the sanctuary, which, after being blessed by Reverend Xaba, was poured into little plastic cups and handed to those who stood in line to receive it. Having received the water, people walked under the blue and white cloth to be blessed by the ministers and their spouses who laid hands upon them. After everyone had received the water and had a blessing, Reverend Xaba walked throughout the church and sprinkled the healing water. This represented a final cleansing and blessing. Members believed that this blessed water and the healing rituals changed their lives because the Holy Spirit which came from a powerful God and Jesus Christ was present.

An example of the power of water that has been blessed by the Spirit came from Reverend Xaba during Sunday worship on 27 October 1991. As the service was about to end, he said

"God's people, time is against us. Time is up. We have people who must live having drunk the water. We live by the water and the laying on of hands. Some people don't understand this. We live by the water anywhere and the laying on of hands.... May God develop a new well of water.... May those people who are ill be healed."

The congregants of St. John's drank the water at least once a week and believed that its healing properties kept them spiritually and physically well. One could say that Reverend Xaba, having lived many of the same challenges as his members, certainly shared their world view. Likewise, the members expected to be healed or to maintain their health by drinking the water.

The blessed water was not only used for drinking, it was used for bathing, vomiting and enemas. The water was a purifying agent that cleansed bodies internally and externally. Dirt that entered a person's body from foreign sources had to be removed, thus making the use of enemas, and vomiting central ritual activities. During structured interviews members talked openly about how the blessed water was used. Thole said, "I had an enema and vomited bad things out of me with water.... I began to feel better." Mrs. Ntiliti said, "I drank the water and brought it back up again. I had an enema and I had a bath." A bath usually accompanied the ritual acts of vomiting and enemas. Unclean elements from the outside world lay upon the skin and had to be removed. The following example
of removing unclean spirit elements from the skin is illustrated from a
description I wrote following the funeral and burial of Reverend Xaba on
8 August 1992:

Saturday was the day that black South Africans buried their dead. It was the
day that most people did not work and the community always honored the
dead and their families by attending funerals. Services were usually held in
the open air. It was difficult to accommodate large crowds in the small
structures in which people lived or worshiped. There was however, another
compelling reason that funerals were held outdoors. Most Africans believed
that the body of a deceased person was unclean. Those who handled the
body, those who attended funerals, and those who entered the cemetery
entered an unclean state of being. The resolution of being in a polluted state
was to wash one's body with water as quickly as possible so that others
would not be exposed to the uncleanliness carried by the person who had
been exposed. After the burial of Reverend Xaba many people returned to
his home. At the outside gate there were large basins of water for people to
wash themselves. By washing in this way, each person was cleansed and
could enter the home of the widow Xaba.

Thus, water was used as a primary cleansing element. The blessed water
had the power to remove unclean spirits. One informant, Thobeka, said
that she sprayed her house with the water, particularly when her children
cried during the night. Children, being very vulnerable, were susceptible
to being disturbed by evil spirits. Water was the source for removing the
spirits or preventing them from entering a person's home. Mr. Mjoli
explicitly stated the linkage between evil spirits, children, and blessed
water. He said, "We spray with prayed water in our home. We do this
when the children don't sleep in a good way. This is how we must fight the
evil spirits."

Water then was a source of healing, an element used to cleanse
impurity, and the means through which St. John's members fought evil
spirits. It was a source that members continually used in many areas of
their lives. Thozama provided a useful illustration of the varied uses of
water. She talked about how St. John's members taught her to use the
blessed water and how she was healed:

Then they told me to drink water so that I could vomit and take in water for
an enema. They also gave me a bath. They told me that I must also have a
bottle of water to take home. They said to pour some of the water in the
bath. They stressed that I must always use this water while I bathed. It did
not take long for me to get well and find a job. I found a job quickly. At the
present time I work as a domestic in the home of a white family. I started
the job in December 1990.
The use of "prayed water" was a vehicle that transformed the lives of people who lived in a world dominated by liminality. Much of the ambiguity of their lives was motivated by micro and macro structures that worked against people of African descent.

African Indigenous Churches as Agents of Transformation

The principal goal of this paper is to explore various ways in which African indigenous churches have and can serve as a resource for socio-political transformation of the historical cultural effects of Apartheid in South Africa.

First, global and national events (macro-level) influence the political, social, economic, and religious development of local communities (micro-level) of black South Africans. A reading of South African history demonstrates that there is a systemic link between the historical development of macro-structures that gave advantage to white South Africans and guaranteed the underdevelopment of African, Asian, and so-called Coloured communities. Successive South African governments dictated that economic profits which resulted from the labor of black South Africans living in a state of underdevelopment, be utilized for the benefit of the country and its privileged and developed minority—white South Africans.15 Black South Africans suffered the consequences of underdevelopment, particularly in the area of health care. Thus, macro-level events influenced micro-level cultural forms in South Africa. Healing as it occurred in micro-level social relations, and within the sacred space of St. John's, helped to transform the lives of St. John's members in a way that empowered them to persevere in macro-level Apartheid culture. Years of social, political, and economic dynamics laid the foundation for local communities of black South Africans to develop their own cultural forms to create meaning for their lives. St. John's Church was one expression of the way that black South Africans "redeployed" signs and created their own local histories.16 St. John's represented a particular micro-level expression that helped black South Africans negotiate the material social process in which they were entrenched.

Second, rituals of healing performed in sacred space empowered people


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who entered secular space. The rituals utilized symbols that served as text to understand the world in which members lived their lives. It is important to ask how the symbols used in St. John's rituals interfaced with the social, structural and psychological processes of the lived reality of members. Victor Turner suggests that a symbol may have many meanings. Moreover, he suggests that a symbol's meaning emerges out of the context in which it is used, as well as from the aim of its users. What does Turner's theory mean concretely for symbols used at St. John's? Did these symbols and their various meanings in macro and micro structures, represent an example of oppressed people "redeploying" symbolic meaning so that power was generated on the micro-level, despite exterior macro forces? Can it be argued that the symbols were a means for St. John's members to re-order social reality produced from the interaction of ideological/intellectual, political/economic, psycho/social, and sacred/secular macro-systems, as well as from the life experiences of St. John's members? It is conceivable that as St. John's members entered the liminal period created in ritual and reflected in the social reality of their lives, they were participating in a drama that created a transformation of imposed categories of domination from the macro-structure, and re-created factors of existence that were life enhancing on the micro-level.

While the macro-level created an ideology of Apartheid that controlled cultural meaning on the national level, the micro-level of St. John's created rituals that contested those meanings in sacred space and negotiated new meanings to be lived out in secular space. This dramatization for transformation was done using water, which was enhanced by umoya, the powerful Spirit that provided continuity with the past. These symbols of received religion provided an avenue for a suffering people to be renewed in spite of life's hardships. In the words of one St. John's member, "I used to suffer in this world and I got the bottle of water.... I remember how I was penniless, without food and even clothes to wear and God brought me here." What did the bottle of water represent for this member? The water symbolized a means for the member to be connected to a community of people who gave him the physical necessities for life: food, clothing, and shelter. Was there more meaning in these symbols? The water as enhanced by umoya possibly gave the member added strength to face obstacles created by a penetrating social structure that thwarted life for

those who were poor and black in South Africa. Indeed, the symbols employed in the rituals at St. John's gave expression to the paradox of life in South Africa for those who lived with harsh realities, sickness of their physical bodies and pollution of their national body; a body whose structures further impeded already difficult lives.

Third, healing rituals are a source for reorienting the social reality of poor black South Africans. The history and effects of Apartheid have restrained the black population and the poor in particular. The nature of healing rituals can influence whether the effects of Apartheid on social relations are replicated or transformed. There exists a tension between replication and transformation. St. John's adherents, as social beings, moved back and forth between acceptance of the hegemonic Apartheid system and its legacy of abusive racial discrimination on the one hand, and resisted the dominant macro-level system on the other. Transformation and replication are categories that are not static, but are in fact, active historical processes.

Negotiation and renegotiation were represented in the healing rituals that occurred among St. John's members in sacred space. The rituals of healing propelled St. John's members toward transformation and restructuralization. In a sense, the congregation represented what Victor Turner called "communitas:" a microcosm of society that has risen in opposition to the patterns of behavior of black people who are dominated by Apartheid culture. In this instance, the non-elites contested the shared knowledge that was articulated, distributed, and controlled by elites and refashioned it into cultural meaning that singularly made sense for the non-elites or those who are marginalized. The new meanings were created in the ritual actions of the priest/healer and the congregation. The priest/healer was one of the roles which represented that which Victor Turner called status elevation and reversal. An example from my fieldwork illustrates this point:

I met a young man who was interested in becoming a member of St. John's. He was unemployed, unable to support his family and quite depressed. During worship, he sat with the other St. John's men. His rumpled and wrinkled shirt and pants were quite a contrast to their sparkling and neatly pressed white coats and blue belts. His quiet demeanor revealed an emotional affect of discouragement with life. As the congregation sang songs and the movement of the Spirit (umoya) possessed some of the evangelists, he sat unaffected. This young man came to St. John's several

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consecutive Sundays and had many conversations with Reverend Xaba. In time, he partook of the blessed water and participated in the rituals. Over a period of three weeks, I noticed that his countenance changed. The most significant change occurred when he was baptized and was given a white coat and blue belt to wear. It was as if a new person had arrived in the same body. Now as he stood with the St. John's men wearing his sparkling white coat and blue belt, his face shone. He emoted a happiness that I had not experienced from him before. He began to testify about what St. John's meant to him as his life took on new meaning. Over a period of time, this man took a key role in facilitating worship services. When he testified other members listened intently. His new role at St. John's stood in stark contrast to who he was when he first came to the church. Previously, he was forlorn and dejected, now he had vitality and hope. His unkempt appearance and sense of insecurity was exchanged for a neat, ordered and hope filled life. He began to work and support his family. His status indeed had been elevated.

This illustration aptly shows how a black man who was unemployed and without the means of economic support, upon joining St. John's and personally experiencing care and community in sacred space, gained a sense of self-esteem and reordered his life in a way that elevated him. This elevation helped his self-esteem and helped the community as they witnessed a positive change in another member's life. Thus, his elevation was acknowledged and reinforced by the St. John's community, who credited his changed life as coming from a supernatural source. The rituals of healing were a form of contestation of the effects of Apartheid on the lives of black South Africans in the context of St. John's, an African indigenous church. Thus, secular history was reshaped by non-elites or subordinates in sacred space. The new order created social relations that provided a means to cope in a secular world that was disjoined and hostile for poor black people.

Communal Survival Strategies and Health Care: The Politics of Healing

St. John's members, as "liminal persona," lived in an Apartheid culture that constantly put their sense of well being in jeopardy. In other words, Apartheid precipitated a state of uncleanliness\(^{21}\) that was often manifested as sickness, violence, and being systemically cut off from those things to which white South Africans had access such as land, quality housing, health care, education, and employment. However, the healing rituals of African indigenous churches provided a means for poor black South Africans to turn to a comforting community and to a respected holy leader.

when sickness appeared.

First, the healer, who lived in the same cultural context as the patient, provided a source of support that could best be duplicated by one who lived in the same cultural context as the members. When a sickness was acute, members went to the hospital, but in most cases, the adherents had an initial consultation with the priest/healer and followed the prescribed healing applications first.

Another strategy that emerged as a result of healing rituals was networks of support. Mamphela Ramphele notes in her dissertation on hostel dwellers in African townships in Cape Town that a communal survival strategy, which she calls an "economy of affection," includes relatives, "home-people" (amakhaya) and acquaintances. In like fashion, St. John's members developed an "economy of affection" at the church. When members were too sick to work, those who had been healed and had returned to work, shared their income, food and other services. Those who were well but unemployed, cared for the children of those who worked. Thus, the sharing of resources, material and spiritual, was a benefit.

In addition, a strategic result of healing ritual was the sharing of stories of strength and renewal among members of St. John's. A person usually came to the church in crisis. As a result, congregation members shared their journey of coming to St. John's and what was required for their healing. Those who were healed participated in helping newcomers, and newcomers in crisis had a choice about whether or not to participate in the variety of experiences the church provided such as the ritual bath, enema and emetic for healing; church services four times a day; or baptism, which resulted in being able to wear the blue and white uniform. Individualism was minimized, and therefore, individuals were quickly incorporated into a community of love and support. The devastating effects of ill health and societal conditions could be overcome by a transformed community who believed in a liberating source beyond themselves, but it was in fact, the members themselves, who became the liberating source.

Conclusion: St. John's and the Politics of Resistance

My treatment of healing rituals at St. John's has been an effort to document a phenomenon that in the words of Comaroff is "dialectic in a

double sense." First, the rituals were an interaction between micro and macro Apartheid structures and social relations between poor black South Africans. Secondly, the cultural historical design of Apartheid constructed a hegemonic system of dominance that enforced the subordination of blacks. The dynamic interplay between these factors provides persuasive evidence for explaining why St. John's founders and members rewrote and reconstructed the meaning of social expectations and symbols of the missionaries, into categories that were meaningful for their historical world view and human experience. I suggest that the healing rituals of St. John's were the aftermath of synchronous parallelism and transformation, an approach that began as a result of indigenous African beliefs converging with the expansion of European colonialism.24

St. John's Church, I suggest, by indigenizing symbols received from missionaries and contesting the expected norms of imported religion, and by incorporating indigenous symbols in healing rituals, has in fact "signaled dissent" by inciting a transposition of meaning which was the result of the contradiction of the social order generated by Apartheid. As Jean Comaroff writes:

The purposive act of reconstruction, on the part of the nonelite, focuses mainly on the attempt to heal dislocations at the level of experience, dislocations which derive from the failure of the prevailing sign system to provide a model for their subjectivity, for their meaningful and material being. Their existence is increasingly dominated by generalized media of exchange—money, the written word, linear time and the universal God—which fail to capture a recognizable self-image. These media circulate through communicative processes which themselves appear to marginalize peoples at the periphery; hence the major vehicles of value have come to elude their grasp. In these circumstances, efforts are made to restructure activity so as to regain a sense of control.25

Thus, St. John's and other African indigenous churches are a form of "dissenting Christianity" that redesigned the signs of "Protestant orthodoxy and the global industrial culture."26 The reconstituted meaning systems, by Africans, for themselves, in their own sacred space allowed value to return to their lives, despite the daily devaluation they lived with in secular Apartheid space.

St. John's, then, symbolized dissenting Christianity that empowered its

24. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
members in sacred space, so that they could live emboldened lives in secular space. In a sense the sacred space was a ritualized space between the local order and a macro-level world of Apartheid, which drained resources and energy. The ritualized space served to rejuvenate people. It is true that the healing rituals did not reverse the powerful structure of the Apartheid macro-system, yet, as a socio-cultural form, the healing rituals empowered those most vulnerable, poor black South Africans, to live as liberated a life as possible under the press of the macro-structure. The act of establishing churches as institutions separated from the colonial powers was an act of resistance. It meant that there would be separate sacred space for African peoples to practice religion on their own terms. Indeed, the symbolic order of the micro-level of the healing rituals of St. John's stood in stark contrast to the entrenched patterns of the macro-level. As such, the symbols of the micro-order worked to disempower Apartheid structures and in so doing, those marginalized gained an identity and established accord in a macro-order which was essentially a chaotic world.

Can it be argued that the rituals of healing were the opiate of St. John's members? Did they pacify people to sleep with the tune of a lullaby permitting the macro-system to be a giant mother rocking its baby to sleep a life of subservience? Or were St. John's and other African indigenous churches firmly grounded in a politics of resistance, with the genius of subliminally working against the forces of Apartheid, but perhaps in a disguised form? Certainly, the history of slavery in America is filled with examples of slaves using "the Spirituals and the Blues", that is, sung words and phrases, to serve as signals for escape from bondage. St. John's instilled pride in people to the point that they infrequently utilized hospitals and medical personnel. When a sickness started, members began with the diagnosis of their own trusted priest/healer. This can be viewed as an act of protest and defiance against an Apartheid health care system. While such acts of resistance did not directly challenge the hegemonic force of the macro-system, they did contest and prevent the polluted system's invasion into structures of the sacred space at the micro-level of St. John's.

This type of resistance cannot be discounted, although it is tacit. While Apartheid affected St. John's members' perceptions of themselves as black people, it did not prevent them from creating a symbolic reality that


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empowered them in the micro-level and provided tenacity to function in the macro-world. St. John's members had a consciousness about their race and the ways in which white South Africans used color to exert dominance. They had a consciousness about the evil dominance perpetrated by the Apartheid system. They also had a sense of the power of their rituals to transform their own lives. Thus, they created a counter-hegemonic force through the use of rituals of healing. Indeed, St. John's and other African indigenous churches are a continuing source of socio-political transformation in South Africa.