

Ilana's research

In 2003, John Thamsanqa became one of South Africa's youngest millionaires when he won R7 million in the National Lottery. Today John is serving 28 years in jail for murder, ostensibly over an unpaid loan of R5 000. John often proclaims his innocence and has explained his predicament in terms of demons and jinns that jealous businesspeople, who had to "sweat for their money" rather than receiving it directly from God, sent into his life. He also blames his harsh sentence on the judge's perception of him as a Lottery winner and says that his family would have been in a position to support him had the jackpot not torn them apart. Although John's story is atypical, he shares with other instant millionaires a deep disillusionment about the meeting between dreams and reality (cf. Eckblad & von der Lippe 1992; Falk & Mäenpää 1999; Kaplan 1978). In South Africa, such disillusionment does not only stem from the enormous distances between 'real life' and the lifestyle that the Lottery facilitates, but also from the limits of people's economic imagination. Thus John for instance recalled his "embarrassment" when he could only list a cellphone and a new pair of tekkies when the Lottery's financial consultant asked him about potential big-ticket purchases.

John might have spared himself this humiliating experience had he attended the new Universal Church of the Kingdom of God (UCKG) that recently opened a branch in his home town. The church is of Brazilian origin and has been phenomenally successful in establishing branches and attracting followers in post-apartheid South Africa (Freston 2005: 40, 51). In church services, on radio and television, the UCKG encourage their (very poor) congregants to imagine "blessed" lives of abundant wealth and boundless consumption. Pastors often tell people to test-drive BMWs, to try on designer clothes, to attend showings of elite houses and to enter expensive restaurants, if only to use the restrooms. Such experiences ostensibly help church members to better formulate the blessings they demand from God during the church's ubiquitous campaigns.

Unlike other Pentecostal-Charismatic Churches, the UCKG actively discourages acts of 'Christian' charity and fellowship and pays little attention to 'good deeds' or the experience of the Holy Spirit. Its pastors also insist that people's relationship with God be devoid of "emotions" and that socialisation between members be kept to a minimum. Church members frequently assert that their brethren's "untrustworthiness" and possible demonic possessions prevented them from socialising in church. There was also a great dearth of voluntary social meetings between regular members outside the church's six daily services while churchgoers did not celebrate weddings, baptisms or funerals as 'community' events. Despite the UCKG's large

number of scheduled services, those that attended the church did not have a shared history or identity; in fact, few people even told their families or friends that they went to the church. In this church, as many pastors and strong members reiterated, you could only “trust God”. However, the kind of relationship that the UCKG prescribed with God was devoid of the intimacy and emotional engagement common in many other Pentecostal and Charismatic churches. Dismissive of the “word information” and “emotions” of other churches, the UCKG emphasised an individual’s ability and willingness to engage in a “spiritual war” against Satan. The only way to defeat Satan and restore God’s Kingdom on earth was to exorcise demons from the nexus of a person’s body and to induce God to reactivate the flow of his blessings into that person’s life. To the latter end, the UCKG promoted a “two-step plan to prosperity”; the first step was to “tithes” or sacrifice money while the second step was to “test God” by demanding your blessings as part of the reciprocal debt relationship or “contract” you initiated in the first step. It is in this reciprocal economy between faithful members and God that charity and financial help to loved ones detracted from the war on Satan. Every penny thus diverted from the money set aside to re-establish God’s Kingdom detracted from the efficacy of the sacrifice.

These case studies, drawn from my PhD and postdoctoral research projects on the UCKG and the South African Lottery respectively, ask pertinent questions about being human and about circuits of consumption.

Thus my PhD work on the UCKG, a church without a ‘community’ and one that is resolutely focused on the ‘material’, problematises the nature of (religious) sociality, the dichotomies between religion and the secular, ideas of spirituality and religion, money and value, materiality and understandings of ontology and epistemology as separate kinds of knowledge in Africa. An abiding theme in this work has been to uncover the Western cosmological assumptions that underlie much current research on neoliberal economies, religion and consumption. Thus, contrary to a body of literature that explains the popularity of prosperity gospel churches in terms of thwarted neoliberal hopes, I show that people do not join the UCKG to materialise the unattainable promises of neoliberalism but to restore and protect an intended life of abundance ‘blocked’ by the work of invisible evil forces. As such, my interviewees traced the nexus of their troubles to their permeable bodies, which were vulnerable to a hostile world of constantly ‘upgrading’ witches, evil spirits and demons. Such views had long historical roots and predated the first Christian conversions in the area (Etherington 1978; Ngubane 1977:1-29). The restoration of my interviewees’ blessings then did not depend on social cooperation, as many

theorists believe, but on efficacious ‘technologies’ that were part of larger circuits of consumption, not only with other humans but also with the invisible. In my work I also suggest that an interdisciplinary methodological focus beyond church institutions to local ontologies and life histories would paint a picture of a much more constrained and tragic believer than the empowered subject of neoliberal studies. Such a focus would also lead to a more “chastened view of culture generally and of religion in particular” (Orsi 2005:170). Beyond the individual believer, the ways in which new Pentecostal Charismatic Churches imagine humans, even fellow churchgoers as demon-infested has deeply divisive and violent implications for human rights and ‘national reconciliation’ in post-apartheid South Africa.

My research on the South African Lottery, part of a larger UK project focussing on “Local Economies” in post-apartheid South Africa, similarly focuses on the complex dynamics of consumption and imaginings of what it is to be ‘fully’ human in a context of extreme deprivation. As such, I focus on ex-Lottery winners and people who gamble in South African townships. I trace their understandings of the flows of money and goods, sharing and familial obligations, luck and economic entitlement in a ‘spirited’ world that acts on humans. In this context, the potentiality of money is intimately tied to the integrity of the human body and its position in relation to other people. John Thamsanqa for instance explained the ‘impotence’ of his Lottery winnings in terms of the access that invisible jinns and demons had to his body through the machinations of other people. To protect his family from such destructive forces, John was loathe to share his winnings with them and blew it all on unproductive, sterile ventures. His family dismissed his fears and is deeply resentful of his inability to share his windfall. Thus people’s definitions of what it is to be human have important implications for the circuits of consumption they engage with. Beyond this focus, my research also deals with conceptions of ‘work’ and the economic imagination of Lottery winners after their spending horizons expand beyond imagining.