

Annual General Meeting on Saturday 16th August, 2014.

Guest speaker: Barbara Shaw
Based on her MA degree called:

Sacred times, sacred spaces: A study of the relationship between Melville Koppies and the African Initiated Churches who pray there

My friend Revil Mason who has uncovered many Iron Age sites across the Gauteng region, including Melville Koppies, told me that, when flying over Johannesburg in a helicopter, it is possible to see that the parks and open spaces are marked with circles which show the places where groups of people congregate and pray. These circles are not just marks of human activity, they are sometimes even formally concreted and arranged with stones on the perimeters, making them marks of human intervention on the landscape.

These circles are used by members of many various African Initiated Churches as assembly points for prayer and fellowship and have become a feature of our cities and our parklands. The prayer groups who meet on Melville Koppies have a special connection with the area but all over the city there are groups of worshippers who meet in open spaces such as parks and undeveloped land.

These places, such as church buildings, cathedrals, synagogues and circles in the land, make people who use them feel a sense of “rootedness”, the opposite of feeling marooned in the world.

My hypothesis is that the western part of Melville Koppies is in the process of becoming a sacred space for the approximately twenty-one groups who have used the Melville Koppies as a site for prayer meetings since the 1970s. This land and its developing traditions, is becoming a place where people are overcoming their “rootlessness” and are creating meaning in a sacred space which can be passed on to future generations. Urban dwellers have left the rural life where people lived with their families and their tribal members and have come to a place where they must form new roots. These prayer groups have been created in order to recover that lost sense of community. The people in these groups take care of each other even though they are from different backgrounds. In these prayer groups, a strong sense of

belonging, which is so central in African spirituality, is thriving in a world which is, to them, culturally barren.

This thesis aims to highlight these issues using Melville Koppies as a microcosm of the creation of kinship relationships through the medium of religious belief. These are used as a mode of coping with vulnerability and provide succour to those who have lost these bonds because of apartheid.

Mbiti argued that the basis of African Traditional Religion was the communal life in a small scale society with a common language and value system. The symbiosis of religion and society made them inseparable because religion is regarded as the strongest element in the African traditional background and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the lives of the people concerned

Sundermeier describes the importance of land in these traditional societies by saying:

The land has a mythical quality. It is sanctified as the ancestors' place of origin, by their great deeds, their history and their graves. Its dignity is that of the indigenous inhabitants ... Whoever reduces the lands, endangers their life. Land was never private property in Africa. It always belonged to the community ... The desire for a home, a place where you belong is regarded as the strongest unalterable force of humankind. "Home" does not simply mean land as a source of livelihood, it means organised space, separation from the unorganised, from the chaos of the steppe or the primeval forest.

The land, like everything else, including the ancestors, belongs not to one person but to the group and it is the group which is the prerequisite to life. This is expressed in the age-old proverb "*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*" which translates as "a person is a person through other people". This means that the individual does not and cannot exist alone, s/he exists within the framework of the contemporary community, its geographical space, its ancestors and its history.

Spaces have become meeting points where people from different cultures can meet on the basis of equality and mutual respect, a sharing with the intention to empower within a relationship of reciprocity.

Africans, like all humans, are tied to the land but Africans are also tied to the group because it provides them with their history, evidence of their roots and of their

connection with their ancestors. If they are separated from these ties, it is believed that this will bring disaster to family and community life, as Mbiti says:

To remove Africans by force from their land is an act of such great injustice that no foreigner can fathom it. Even when people voluntarily leave their homes in the countryside and go to live or work in the cities, there is a fundamental severing of ties which cannot be repaired and which often creates psychological problems with which urban life cannot as yet cope.

Removal by force is therefore more than just the loss of land, it is the loss of the relationship with the land and with others who are also forcibly removed from it.

According to the leader of Circle 21 who has been praying on Melville Koppies for many years, the churches were chased off the land in the 1970s by the “Blackjacks” who were security personnel in black uniforms who were hired by the municipality to protect council officials carrying out service cut-offs and evictions. In about 1977, while South Africa was going through unprecedented insurrection, their leader, Sam, called several meetings for all the churches in the Arbouretum which was a shady area on the stream next to Beyers Naude Road, out of view. The churches then started returning to the koppie in stages and claimed spaces where they established their circles.

Just like many other African Initiated church groups, the Melville Koppies groups emphasise their unity as a group. I have noticed in my interviews that, while they gather for religious reasons, there are also strong social bonds that are formed within the groups themselves and also sometimes between different groups. This is a quote from an interviewee that explains these bonds:

We pray but, most importantly, sometimes we gather and share ideas about belief, about spirituality. So for us to gather in this place is a very important thing because we share ideas, we share our spirituality, we share love, we share everything. If we want to make a plan for something, maybe like Good Friday when we want to have a Passover with the other churches, we gather here, we donate money, we make available transport to take us there. If we have lost one of our members no matter where he comes from, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Botswana, we gather here and we plan how can we take that person home.

Sacred rites are meeting places, points of liminal contact between the sacred and the profane. They are visible, tangible, repeatable patterns through which the sacred is experienced; they are ritual dramas aimed at the restoration of well-being; they

mark transitions in the life cycle or they commemorate events or persons. Rites are actions of word and gesture performed in a particular place and at a particular time by a group or individual.

The power of ritual has a profound effect on identity formation and the ability to relate to the world in a meaningful way. This helps the individual to understand the world in the context of common values and meanings, as the society navigates its way through social change. Ritual brings order to communication, builds a sense of security and belonging and opens people to a sense of the sacred. Sacramental rites ascribe values, a sense of meaning, to the cosmos by their repetitive, traditional nature which calls for surrender, for participation within the ritual which leads to experiences of *communitas*, a sense of solidarity which brings people into contact with their transcendent selves. The community then connects with the collective memory of the faith community.

The gathering of people on this mountain on a Sunday at a particular place and time are providing the basis of the invention of tradition. It is very obvious that the formation of the prayer circles and the rituals which are practiced in them are patterns of current behaviour which have been developed and accepted by these communities to serve their needs which are those of people living in a culturally barren world and who have been affected by the vagaries of migrant labour and the complex political situation of this country. The rituals such as the long walk up the mountain, the wearing of uniforms, the bending of knees in the circles, the removing of shoes, the songs and prayers of the groups gathered for prayer and the joy and acceptance of strangers and followers alike, are “invented traditions”. These new traditions have strong connections to the past, be it the Christian past or African traditional culture but have been created by these people, in their lifetime and for the future of their children who may use this mountain for their own religious rituals.

The members believe that their prayer groups are not just places where they find a sense of belonging but that the whole area on a Sunday becomes one large community of people who are together even though they are praying in different circles.

And what I found out, even if we are in different circles, there togetherness in this place. We just love each other. We can move to our place where we worship or go to another circle to talk about God. We come together to pray for the children or someone who is sick and God hears us very easily.

Meeting these people, observing their closeness, hearing their words, and sharing a small part of their lives was a life-changing experience for me. I am honoured and privileged to have been allowed into their world. As I walked up the hill with them time and time again, I felt that liminality that Van Gennep speaks about and eventually, after I became known to them, I was greeted as if I was an old friend who was coming to visit. As I climbed up the steep hill with the mountain dust in my hair and my nostrils, I began to understand why they came to this place – it is unlike any other place for them. It may look the same as other places and it may not be unique in any other way, but for these groups, this place is their special place. Only now do I understand why one person said:

I'm full with that love that I'm with God now. I'm in the presence of Him now because I've chosen this mountain. Because I've chosen this place, He's with me now. So, this mountain to me is like a holy place ...

There was a strong feeling that the groups were unified in the way that they accepted strangers from other places and my interviews did not uncover a single incident where people were judged by the fact that they came from other provinces or even from other countries. I felt that they were proud of this inclusive attitude that all were welcome to take part in their prayer services and share their troubles even though this may not be the case outside of this environment.

It appears from the interviews that these churches understand that they do not exist in isolation because “in the context of Africa, peace is essentially linked with community ... Peace is not possible on your own ... Peace is thus not a gift, but an assignment, a social duty, a religious exercise”. Peace in this instance means that the groups must respect each other and, together with respect, they need to support each other as if they were kin. I believe that they do and this is confirmed by one person who said:

We are all combined, we agree on everything, we do everything connected. There's no one who takes his or her own decisions, we do everything together.

It seems like here you are close to your best friends because we are brothers, best friends. I'm very comfortable when I am next to my brother because I know nothing bad can happen to me ... we feel comfortable because we know we are in the place of praise ... here you forget about any worries. I might pick up my worries when I'm going back home but when I am here, I don't have any worries, I'm just praising. That's good enough for us.

One person compared his group to his family and described how his parents would listen to him and advise him. His group, he believes, performs this function:

If I've got the problem, I talk with all these people and they can try to help me with whatever they can do ... so that's why I say that these people from my church are like my father and mother because I report everything which is happening in my life to them.

The way that these groups interact with each other and also how they relate to each other within the group shows a depth of concern that normally would only be experienced among family members. I believe that this is how they regard each other, not simply acquaintances who meet once a week for prayer services as do many people who belong to formal church congregations but as family members who would stand by them through thick and thin. These communities have developed a communal lifestyle rather than simply a church.

I asked the interviewees how they would feel if the council decided to take this land away from them to be used for other purposes. This appeared to cause them some distress but their answers showed that they believed that they would have to abide by the decision. Nobody said that they would fight for the right to use the land even though one young person expressed anger at the suggestion of losing the land. Most of the responses, though, showed a fatalistic acceptance of the status quo as if these were forces beyond their control, reminiscent of a master/servant relationship. As an interviewee expressed:

You know, it's very hard for us because we like to be here but we know that the government can put up a board. The next time we come here we find the board here that says no-one can pray here on this mountain. We know that we can't do anything about it but we can feel hurt because our heart is here. We will call Jesus to say "Jesus we are here, we are your people, we are your sons. We like to be here, to come and pray every Saturday and every Sunday but we know that there is a law here. People who are high in the government can put a board here and they can say: "You gentlemen who are preaching here, this place is closed".