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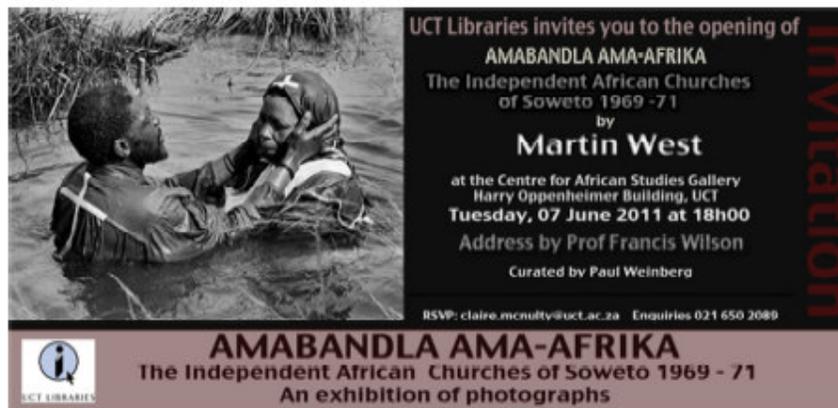
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Celebrating Africa in the midst of apartheid

Amabandla Ama-Afrika: The Independent African Churches of Soweto, 1969-71
Photographic exhibition opens on Tuesday, 7 June 2011 at 18h00
Centre for African Studies, Upper Campus, UCT



A remarkable photographic collection of African Independent Churches in Soweto, taken between 1969 and 1971, will be showcased in an exhibition at the Centre for African Studies Gallery on the University of Cape Town's upper campus. UCT Emeritus Professor Martin West took the photographs while doing the fieldwork for his PhD in social anthropology at UCT. The exhibition runs from 8 June to 3 August.

These black & white photographs document what UCT curator Paul Weinberg describes as a "window on a world that dances between indigenous values and Christianity brought by the colonial and settler communities". They show a society that celebrated its African heritage in the midst of the struggle against apartheid. West had to work around the apartheid laws, which limited access to townships by white people, and relied on Beyers Naude for a friendly

contact in the "Non-European Affairs Department" who could arrange an appropriate pass for West to enter Soweto legally.

By the end of the 19th Century, two streams of Christianity emerged in South Africa and became the focus of West's research – the Ethiopian and the Zionist movements. His research culminated in a PhD and a book called *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City*, published in the 1970s.

At the time of his research, the largest concentration of these churches were based in Soweto and, as he observed, reached out to the poor and marginalized. West established a relationship with these followers. As he recalls, "They were very sensitive to being looked down on. When I came to talk to them openly and honestly, they responded. So it was in that way, through talking and sharing, that I gained their trust."

West's interaction with the congregants of these churches took place shortly before the Soweto uprisings of 1976. This exhibition, 40 years later, is an extraordinary reflection of the community at that time.

As Weinberg says: "This exhibition is a re-imagination of material that could well have remained deeply buried in the archive. Martin West documented a community of practitioners that for its own spiritual survival 'closed the curtain on the world'. He photographed an environment that for all intents and purposes had been closed off to white South Africa."

While South Africa today is a country where the Christian faith is predominantly practised, links to an indigenous past are still very apparent. The Institute for Natural Resources has shown that "84 percent of all South Africans consult a traditional healer more than three times a year, after or in place of going to a western medical doctor".

West, who is also a former Deputy Vice-Chancellor of UCT, will receive an honorary degree from UCT on Friday, 10 June 2011 at 10h00 in Jameson Hall. He retired from UCT in 2008 after serving with distinction for 17 years as a Deputy Vice-Chancellor and later as Vice-Principal. Serving under four vice-chancellors, he made a vital contribution to changing governance at UCT during the first decade of the new democratic South Africa.

ENDS

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