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Aserman, Samantha Lee

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Urban Ritual

A hydro-ritual space for the communities of the inner city

Abstract

The heritage and history of a city is often based on urban legend. These stories pertain the cultural rooting of the society that had lived within the cities from their founding and until today. Johannesburg or Egoli appears to have skipped this cultural rooting and instead stems from the political and commercial soil of the gold mines.

If we excavate into the gold mining history of the city – and even into the history preceding it - we can find the hidden sacred and cultural beginnings embedded in our society today. Our society has been formed on the continual evolution of the ideas of the sacred and profane through practices of incorporation, salvation and adaptation.

As the gold mines in the city shut down, in 1940, the migrant labourers were left in hostels in an unfamiliar terrain and little means to make a living (Potenze, 2015). This means that today, we can still find evidence of the importance of sacred rituals similar to those in the mining compounds. Religions and cultures in Johannesburg, that have been gradually changed overtime, are a result of the incorporation of mining labour, urban customs and western ideas (including religion and technologies). Although the city has clearly harmed the rural traditions, we can still see glimpses of the endurance of the sacred within the profane landscape. The profane is adapted by the different communities in the inner city – as will be discussed with reference to the Mai Mai and Shembe (Nazareth Baptist Church) communities – to express their cultures of the sacred, traditional and religious and to accommodate for ritual practices associated with them.

Today's societies of the inner city are a mix of cultures, religions, God, the ancestors and ritual practices - both sacred and profane. By learning from the way in which these communities continually evolved to incorporate their environments into their traditions, the city too must now incorporate these communities and their beliefs into its structure. If this is achieved, it could ignite a healing process through integration as opposed to replacement or removal of elements of the city or of its society.

This report explores ideas of the importance of religion and culture in Johannesburg's context. As it is an architectural analysis, the response will be a proposal for religious infrastructure and space within the area of City and Suburban, alongside the Kwa Mai Mai market and the gathering spaces of the Shembe / Nazareth Baptist Church. This will promote and retain the cultures, traditions and religions that were brought to the city and used as a tool of survival.

