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**Healing in Polluted Places:  
Mountains, Air, and Weather in  
Zulu Zionist Ritual Practice**

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**Abstract**

On the first Saturday of every month at midnight, the Zulu Zionist congregation I worked with would climb a mountaintop in their heavily polluted urban township in Durban, South Africa in search of physical and spiritual healing and restoration. I will use an ethnographic case from this event to argue that the ritual process constituted a movement through and engagement with a mountainous landscape which facilitated embodied engagements with the 'weather-world' as manifestations of a historical landscape where the spiritual world became tangible and embodied. Within this historical framework pollution was both a source of affliction and healing, hence there was no clear-cut distinction between the industrial and environmental pollution that has historically been the concern of Zulu healing rituals. As such, the status of pollution surfaced at the center of ritual locations, where mountains as contaminated places emerged as important, though highly ambivalent sources of health and wellbeing.

**Keywords**

Christianity, landscape, pollution, ritual healing, South Africa.

*Introduction*

This article is based on a total of three years' ethnographic fieldwork which began in 1991 among a group of Zulu Zionists in the African township of Umlazi—South Africa's third biggest township, situated on the outskirts of Durban. The Zionists are part of the African Independent Churches (AICs) which comprised the most rapidly growing religious movement in Africa south of the Sahara for most of the twentieth century (Barrett 1968).

A central focus of these churches is healing. For example, the Swedish missionary and ethnographer, Bengt Sundkler, quoted a Zionist prophet who said that his church 'is not a church but a hospital' (Sundkler 1948: 152). The churches are known to be organized around a prophet who draws on and blends traditional practices with Christianity. It is, in this context, significant that several studies of the Zionist churches have emphasized the ritual significance of the landscape (for example, West 1975: 93; Kiernan 1984; Flikke 2016). One example of this approach to the landscape is a tendency to migrate between an urban home and a rural homestead belonging to the clan of the afflicted where the healing would be conducted beside a pool of water referred to as Bethesda, from the biblical reference (John 5.4-9; see also Sundkler 1948: 151, 200; 1976: 167). The Zionist Bethesda is located in a rural area with clean water and in close proximity to the ancestral graves of the prophet. During my fieldwork, the places of healing were located on a rural reserve associated with the clan of the afflicted, not the prophet, and healings were carried out to re-establish a healthy relation to ancestral spirits. Another site for cleansing rituals was the mountains which are of ritual significance in the AICs as well as in pre-colonial Zulu ritual practices (Sundkler 1976: 167).<sup>1</sup> The most regular ritual location during my fieldwork periods was a monthly trek in which Themba Mbhele, the founding prophet of the congregation, brought his flock to a night of healing by a cairn at a mountaintop near his home.

In this article, I suggest that the urban township of Umlazi was transformed to a place of healing, focusing on the location of ritual processes on a mountaintop in the township to illuminate how an urban landscape contaminated by industrial waste can emerge as a place of healing. I furthermore argue that the location of Zionist healing rituals on mountaintops can be viewed as a result of a long-standing ritual relationship between Zulu people and what the anthropologist, Tim

1. The most prominent is the Nazareth Baptist Church (*iBandla lamaNazaretha*) founded by Isaiah Shembe in 1910. Their holy place, *Ekuphakameni*, literally means the 'elevated place' (see Oosthuizen 1967).

Ingold, has coined the 'weather-world' (Ingold 2010). Before delving further into these themes, however, it is necessary to briefly describe the place of my fieldwork and two key interlocutors.

### *Umlazi as a Ritual Place*

Umlazi was a mission reserve from about the 1850s until it was integrated into the greater Durban area after World War II. It served, from the start, as a labor reserve for Durban's expanding industry. South Durban is today a heavily industrialized area with many polluting chemical industries including two petrochemical refineries and a pulp factory. My field site was located close to Waste-Tech's Umlazi IV landfill for hazardous waste which was closed on 28 February 1997 (Peek 2002: 207f.). Umlazi had therefore, through this, been transformed into 'one of the largest concentrations of inherently dangerous petroleum and chemical industries...and hazardous waste' in South Africa (Wiley et al. 1996: 1). The township was also plagued by violence in the lead up to, and also after, the first democratic elections in 1994. This urban landscape, despite being one of the most violent and polluted areas in post-apartheid South Africa, was also a place of healing for my informants, all members of Themba's Zionist congregation.

I have discussed healing rituals in more detail elsewhere (for example, Flikke 2006, 2016). Most illness narratives I have collected in this research centered on experiences of respiratory problems and encounters with external winds. I, as a Norwegian scholar, however, struggled to make sense of these within my own cultural reference points. Themba Mbhele, for example, responded to my question of how he left his mission church and became a Zionist with an elaborate illness narrative which focused on chest pains, asthma, and other respiratory ailments. My friend, Thandi, an *umkhokheli* in Themba's congregation, similarly left her mission church and turned to the Zionists after encounters with winds that she described as 'stabbing' her, opening her body and blowing through her chest.<sup>2</sup> Such experiences were part of a larger cultural landscape connected to notions of spirit and hence, led to no comments or reactions among the congregation other than that Themba and Thandi were recognized as spiritually gifted (see Flikke 2016). The literature reveals a number of similar accounts. Sundkler recalls how an informant explained his conversion to Zionism by referring to an

2. *umKhokheli* is translated as 'one who pays another's debts' or 'a leader in a woman's church society' (for example, Oosthuizen 1967: 44). In Themba's congregation, it was usually translated into English as a 'prayer lady'.

experience with a nocturnal wind: 'I awoke. A sharp wind blew. I felt that I was full (*ngisuthile*), I was full indeed. I almost burst... I fell down. I threw myself in all directions. My whole body was shaking... I was perspiring and filled with *uMoya*' (Sundkler 1948: 245).<sup>3</sup> Themba's services were furthermore always accompanied by an endless stream of sneezing, belching, groaning, and whistling sounds that emphasize the unusual and irregular movement of air during the periods of the services in which the Spirit moved (see Pauw 1960: 200). These are common signs of ancestral spiritual activity among Zulu diviners and were taken to be indications of the presence of ancestral spiritual powers at gatherings (for example, Callaway 1970 [1868]: 263; Berglund 1989: 137)

Understanding this ritual behavior and the use of a mountain in a severely polluted environment as a ritual place requires a closer look at the Zulu conceptual universe of spirits and pre-colonial and traditional ritual practices.

#### *Wind, Breath, and Spirit in Zulu Religious Practice*

In Zulu cosmology, the person consists of three parts: (1) the *umzimba*, the physical body, (2) the *isithunzi*, which literally means the 'shadow' of an object or person and is the spirit of an individual, which constitutes the ancestral spirit upon death, and (3) the *Idlozi*, which is the spirit of a person who is successfully 'brought back' in the *ukubuyisa* ritual a year after passing away (Krige 1950 [1936]: 175; Callaway 1970 [1868]: 118). The missionary, Axel-Ivar Berglund, who was born, raised, and worked in the mission field in Zululand, stated that *isithunzi* is the preferred term for spirit among the Zulu traditionalists (Berglund 1989: 85). My main concern here, however, is *umoya*, a term depicting 'spirit', 'soul', 'air', 'wind', and 'breath'.<sup>4</sup> *Umoya* is the vital force of humans. When *umoya* leaves the body, the person stops breathing and is dead. People then say '*umphefumelo*, i.e. the air, the breath, or the spirit has left the body and the person is no more' (Vilakazi 1965: 87). The Catholic missionary A.T. Bryant argued that *umoya* should historically only be translated as 'breath', 'wind', and 'air'. *Umoya* was, however, used by early missionaries as a translation for the biblical concept of soul and spirit (Bryant 1905: 392). Berglund supported Bryant, claiming that emphasis was most probably placed on *umoya* by Christian missionaries

3. *Umoya* can be translated as 'spirit', 'wind', and 'breath'. The term will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

4. The KiKongo term *moyo*, translated as 'soul' or 'life force' by Janzen (1978: 179 n. 7), was discussed in the same context as breath (1978: 175) and dizziness (1978: 177).

and hence primarily refers to the Holy Spirit (Berglund 1989: 85). I think this is very likely. I have, however, elsewhere argued that Zulu history indicates a long-standing connection between ritual practices and wind, air, and atmosphere (Flikke 2016). The Christian translation of *umoya* as spirit hence makes sense in relation to traditional ritual practices. The Holy Spirit was furthermore specifically referred to in Themba's congregation as *umoya ongcwele* (pure and holy).<sup>5</sup> I will therefore focus on the continuities between pre-colonial Zulu cosmology and the ritual practice of the Zulu Zionist movement.

Connecting encounters with the spiritual realm and the winds (*umoya*) to a long-standing ritual relation between the sphere of the spirits and the air and atmosphere demonstrates the common ground between Zulu traditional and Christian notions of the spirit. Historical sources indicate that the weather has been a point of contention from the first interactions between European missionaries and the populations of southern Africa. For example, in David Livingstone's account of his interaction with the Kwena rain-doctor, the rain-doctor laid claim to a world where humans were firmly embedded in the weather-world and had the ability to influence and be influenced by the weather (Livingstone 1857: 23-25). Among the Zulu, *iNkosazana yeZulu* (the Heavenly Princess)<sup>6</sup> was associated with mountains and could, through her cool demeanor, bring rain and fertility (Bryant 1949: 65; Berglund 1989: 665-67). Ritual specialists, referred to as *abelusi bezulu*, usually called 'heaven-herds' in the anthropological literature, would work during times of drought and vicious thunderstorms to control the atmospheric forces in many ways, including through medicines containing the fat of pythons, a sacred animal associated with water and fertility (Berglund 1975: 60; 1989). Similar links between people, the weather-world, and mountains are also apparent within the contemporary Zionist movement.

### *Pollution in Zulu Cosmology*

The diseases the participants are cured of can be categorized under the heading *umnyama*, which roughly translated as darkness and was considered to be a state of being that generated what my informants usually termed 'bad-luck' in English (Flikke 2006). *Umnyama* was, however, also valued by warriors and associated with powerful kings and reproductive women through its association with heat and the need

5. *Cwe* can be translated as 'clear', 'transparent', or 'bright' and has been adopted by the Catholic Church to depict a holy person or saint (Ngubane 1977: 118).

6. She is also referred to as *Nomkhubulwana*.

for reproduction of the clan or expansion of the Zulu nation (Ngubane 1976). As such it breaks with a dichotomized approach which views pollution as defilement and a solely destructive force (Douglas 1966; Raum 1973). Hence, I suggest that pollution (*umnyama*) might best be understood as an aspect of power (*amandla*) in Zulu cosmology. As such it can also be used towards positive ends. In this sense, *umuthi* is amoral and can be a vehicle for both good and bad. *Umnyama* is, furthermore, not a transcendental spiritual force but an ingrained aspect of the material world and hence, associated with the physical constitution of subjects, objects, and places (Berglund 1989: 256). All material substances have a metaphysical component to them, some powerful, others less so. These are forces that can be used for both good and evil by people who possess the proper knowledge and ritual.

As we move through the landscape, some of our substances are shed and left behind, while other substances are also picked up (Ngubane 1977: 24). These are the tracks (*umkhondo*) that dogs pick up while hunting, and this view among the Zulu is a cultural trait shared with the neighboring Khoisan (Low 2007: s75). As mentioned, diseases were mostly spoken of as *umnyama*, (darkness) which could take the form of environmental pollution (Flikke 2016: 211). People or cattle who crossed tracks left by humans or animals imbued with pollution (*umnyama*) were exposed to defiling forces that would eventually make them sick unless properly cleansed and strengthened through ritual means (Beinart and Brown 2013: 210).

These 'tracks' can also float in the air as 'threads' that connect people and places. They are spoken of as *imimoya*, plural of *umoya*. *Imimoya* can be inhaled, the defiling aerial threads (*imimoya emibi*) polluting and resulting in disease (Ngubane 1977: 24). These tracks become particularly troublesome in large cities, which are plagued by pollution and an abundance of people (see Flikke 2016: 102). The leader of the Traditional Healers Association, Mr. Mhlongo, expressed during my fieldwork his and the organization's concern about the spread of Zulu healing practices to urban street corners. In an interview on the *umuthi*<sup>7</sup> street vendors in Durban he said, 'They are not traditional healers, and they should be arrested for treating people on the streets where the wind blows everything onto those herbs' (*The Natal Witness*, 7 November 1995). Even the healing herbal remedy, *umuthi*, can be infused with the dirt of the cities and be transformed from a healing remedy to a carrier of illness, misfortune, and 'bad luck' (*umnyama*).

7. *Imithi* (plur.) are herbal remedies used in traditional healing.

As Janzen has convincingly argued, ritual practices are dominated by affinities between Africa's Bantu-speaking populations (Janzen 1992). In this context, it is worth noting Monica Wilson's similar accounts of the close connection between winds, illnesses, and destruction among the Bantu-speaking Nyakusa. 'The witches', she wrote 'fly by night...on the wind' (Wilson 1951: 91). The wind transports the witches and their evil deeds thereby spreading disease and devastation. The air could also be a medium through which witchcraft (*ubuthakathi*) is spread. As Adam Ashforth described in a study of witchcraft in Soweto, the person responsible for the spread of witchcraft could blow a powdered substance into the air, which would be carried away by the winds, tracking down and striking the victim (Ashforth 2000: 126).

The presence of witches and their evil deeds could not be seen but were sensed in the air. The Zulu 'witch finders', Krige wrote, 'smelled out' (*ukubula*) witches. As the witch finder danced towards the suspects, he 'examine[d] them by means of his olfactory sense', following the threads in the air left behind by the evildoers (Krige 1950 [1936]: 225). The perception of witchcraft as a substance of a negative, forceful, and dark appearance therefore has certain olfactory qualities. This is paralleled in the coastal areas of East Africa and in the Khoisan notions of both wind and witchcraft (see Low 2007). In East Africa, Parkin argued it is because smell 'wafts on the wind that it is of crucial importance' in ritual contexts (Parkin 2007: s41).

Winds, therefore, carry dust, smoke, and odors, weaving perceptible, defiling threads through the atmosphere; threads that connect people and places in ways that cross time and space, potentially bringing humans into contact with substances from places associated with pollution and disease but also with wellbeing. These atmospheric threads can have detrimental influences on those exposed. As with *umuthi*, the metaphysical status of wind and air is ambiguous and can also be associated with good healing powers, depending on the status of the *imimoya* carried by the wind.

### *Mountains as Ritual Places*

Vicious thunderstorms are a regular occurrence in KwaZulu-Natal. Thunder is considered of the male gender, with rolling thunder that brings rain, growth, and prosperity being especially welcomed. The female, cracking thunder on the other hand, is accompanied by forked lightning and is feared because of its destructive powers. The lightning that accompanies female thunder is associated with the lightning bird, *inyoni yezulu*, and is perceived to be 'heat' from the 'Lord-of-the-Sky'

(Berglund 1989: 37). The heat is said to be a result of his anger (*inthukuthelo*) and a physical manifestation of power (*amandla*). Mountains are struck by lightning relatively often and hence become infused with spiritual power from the 'Lord-of-the-Sky'. As I outlined previously, environmental pollution is, as an aspect of material substances, both a source of health and disease.<sup>8</sup> Mountains therefore become potential polluting places due to 'tracks' left behind by lightning (Vilakazi 1965: 24). It is important to keep in mind that the female association links the lightning with the generative power of women who are essential for growth and hence, blessings (see Ngubane 1976). The greatest blessing in the strictly exogamous Zulu society is children who can only be brought forth through a wife from an outside clan. She is thus the source of blessings, yet closely associated with pollution and strictly controlled through abstention (*ukuzila*) and avoidance (*ukuhlonipa*) (Raum 1973). In times of trouble, wives therefore run the risk of being accused of witchcraft. The association between mountains and lightning ensures that these elevated locations are sought out by the Zionist as places of worship, healing, and restoration (Ngubane 1977: 25). Yet they are ritual places that are approached with caution. Themba would therefore only lead us up to the cairn on the highest mountain near his house for what he called a night-long 'commemoration service for the departed' after an elaborate cleansing ritual. We would spend hours there on our knees praying, singing hymns, and dancing while others went through healing rituals crafted to deal with their particular afflictions.

The status of this mountain was related to some experiences of Themba which clearly indicate the notion of pollution at play in his quests for healing. I once asked Themba about the significance of the mountain. He replied that his ancestral spirits had told him to go to the mountain and pray at a time when he was struggling with illness. The following is his account of what happened:

So, I went there, the last time only a week ago, it was terrible thunder. But when I went there... I mean, naturally I am very scared of lightning, but I just left my home, just like a normal person. I went straight up the road and up at the mountain. I just stood there and prayed. Then this lightning started 'tshjuw, tshjuw' [snapping his fingers]. I remember one just hitting me on the head. But it was as if it was a light from a torch—very soft! And then it was light drizzling. Then I was told I was being cleansed and blessed.

8. For a more through discussion of this notion of pollution as an aspect of material substances, see Berglund (1989: 256), Flikke (2014: 13), Ngubane (1976), and Raum (1973: 460).



Themba later told me that the mountain was included in a local myth of an enormous seven-headed spiritual snake (*inhlwathi*) with heads that glowed like lamps that lit up the mountain at night. The snake disappeared when the township expanded and enveloped the area. The cool 'tracks' left by the snake nevertheless turned the potentially polluting place into a place of healing.

Substances are not the only elements that float in the air. Sounds do as well. I have elsewhere accounted how 'bird-talk' and chirping were of spiritual importance (Flikke 2016). These sounds float in the air, bringing subjects into contact with distant spirits, places, and people. The auditory aspects of air are often overlooked in ritual processes as such sounds are not carriers of explicit linguistic meaning but must be interpreted by ritual experts. They are, however, essential for the creation of a ritual atmosphere.

Mountaintops and coastlines are open spaces of contact representing places where things become visible (see Bachelard 1988 [1943]: 136). These favored locales for Zulu Zionist ritual activities are characterized by their exposure to winds. Winds that interact with the surroundings speak as they whistle over the mountaintops, carrying sounds from afar and, at times, drowning out the voices of those standing beside you. The whistling sounds of the winds permeate the ritual processes, immersing the faithful in the sounds of *umoya*, emanating not only from interactions between wind and landscapes, but also taking hold of and filling the bodies of participants who often react with an explosion of whistling sounds.

It is interesting that the above mentioned Nyakusa word for 'witch', *abalozi*, means 'the one that travels with the wind' (Wilson 1951: 91). This is the same word as is used by the Zulu for the practice of divination. The diviner (*isangoma*) sits in *umsamo*, the place where the ritual artifacts of a household are stored, and interprets whistling sounds coming from *ikhothamo*, the sacred area in the thatching at the back of a hut (Berglund 1989: 119). The whistling sounds created by the winds are the voices of the spirits. The wind, whispering around the huts, carries messages from the ancestral spirits to those with the gift of interpretation. These sounds were, to my knowledge, never interpreted in Themba's congregation. I, however, claim that these practices contributed to a sense of communion with the ancestral spirits. When the wind mingled with the landscape, filling the hollows of the ground with sounds as it blew across the mountainous landscapes, it created a soundscape deeply embedded in the ancestral world. The presence of the ancestral spirits, which in this context were referred to as the *abaphansi*, 'those down below', were also

sought out in canyons and by waterfalls and caves.<sup>9</sup> These are permeable places, openings to the ancestral world below, filled with the auditory presence of the unseen. The sounds that arise when the winds take hold of the crevices in the landscape make the places come alive, filling the air with the audible presence of ancestral spirits.

In a similar vein, Terence Ranger describes the inaccessible Matopos hills south-west of Bulawayo with its 'wild granite hills with narrow gorges' as a traditional spiritual center for the oracular cult of the High God, Mwali (Ranger 1999: 11). Quoting a letter dated 28 March 1880, he described the mountains as a place where

God lives in a subterranean cave in a labyrinth of rocks... In this cave is a deep, black well, the well of the abyss. From time to time dull sounds like thunder come forth from this well. The faithful...seek information about hidden things, future happenings, the names of people who have bewitched them... After a few moments of deep silence, they hear, in the midst of the subterranean noises, inarticulate sounds, strange words, broken and incomprehensible. (Ranger 1999: 15)

The relations between the realm of the spirits, landscapes, and movement in the 'weather-world' were not articulated in Themba's congregation other than through testimonies. I have accounted these in more detail elsewhere (Flikke 2006, 2016). However, when the spirit (*umoya*) swirled amongst the ritual participants, then those possessed by the spirit would (like the wind [*umoya*] interacting with the ritual landscape) emit whistling sounds, grunt, yawn and, in other ways, respond through audible changes in respiratory functions. This indicates that bodies, just like landscapes, are permeable and interact with *umoya*. These events were an integral part of the ritual life of Themba's congregation and, therefore, were an aspect of the habitus, best elicited as a bodily, unarticulated engagement with the world which indicates the presence of non-Christian ancestral spirits (*amadlozi*, see note 9).

It is not enough to approach these phenomena as symbols and cultural thought-patterns, but as haptic (sensory) engagements with the weather-world, which must therefore be approached as ontologies. The question, however, remains of how cultural specific historical developments have

9. There are many different terms for ancestral spirits. The most common among my informants was *abadala* ('the old ones'). The common term *amadlozi* appeared to be mostly reserved for Traditional ancestral spirits. Note that *idlozi* (sing.) is philologically related to *umlozi* and to the term *abalozi* introduced above. *Umlozi* is the spirit of a ventriloquist audible by a whistling sound. For a more thorough discussion see Berglund (1989: 89).

influenced our engagement with the weather-world (Harris, Robb, and Tarlow 2013: 167).

*Weather, Perception, and the Open Body*

I have referred elsewhere to Themba as a 'reluctant Zionist' (Flikke 2006). He, like Thandi, experienced respiratory problems that he interpreted as being real, ancestral interventions. He explicitly said that his disease was a result of the early missionary practices of prohibiting the Christian Zulu, the *amakholwa*, from maintaining contact with the traditionalists (*amakhonza*). This effectively divided the Zulu community in two, splitting the ancestral fellowship of the clans and creating jealousy and disharmony which was identified as a source of disease (*umnyama*). To restore his health, he therefore needed to incorporate Traditional ancestral spirits into his life. The ancestors, as elders, demanded a degree of adherence to their lifestyle and hence interfered with his work, placing a ritual demand on him that he found hard to combine with his urban, contemporary lifestyle. The sacrifices his ancestors required him to make were also too expensive to carry out (see Flikke 2006). He tried to ritually accommodate the ancestors within a Christian context. Instead of seeking out caves, caverns, and deep pools of water (all associated with the ancestral spirits down below [*abapansi*]), he therefore preferred to practice his ritual processes in mountains, the place of God, the 'Lord-of-the-Sky' (*inkosi yezulu*). The wind at the top of the mountain I climbed with Thandi and the other members of Themba's congregation on the first Sunday of every month howled over the landscape and took hold of our bodies. We bent forward, flexing our muscles to withstand its force. The bodies of the afflicted took their shape from their will to resist the power of the wind, with the force and lightness of the wind shaping the force of the spirit. Both are not only signified by the word *umoya* but were haptically present when the winds touched the afflicted at these places of worship. The afflicted, moving in this mountainous landscape, were physically challenged to rise, stand, and lean against the force of the wind to move forward. I furthermore began to notice that their bodily motions influenced the ritual atmosphere as participants became gradually invigorated and filled with the lightness of the air and spirit as we approached the summit. The encounters with the weather-world that I outline here make further sense when we look at the relations between bodies and the winds of *umoya*.

As discussed previously, the threads in the air (*imimoya*) point toward a tradition in southern Bantu thought that perceives winds as sources of

both disease and health. Bryant noted that the Zulu believed that the illness *umkuhlane* (the common cold) was brought by the winds. Certain winds were therefore threats to health and were avoided when possible (Bryant 1983 [1909]: 17). The illness narratives and experiences were focused on and expressed through respiration and the chest, thus intimately connecting *umoya* as wind, breath, and spirit to notions of disease and wellbeing. The winds encountered on the mountaintops were the same as those described by Thandi that caused stabbing pains in her upper chest and physically opened her upper torso and filled her with *umoya*. The hole in the chest is well known and described in the ethnographic studies of the Zulu peoples from the early nineteenth century onward. The pioneer missionary, Callaway, recounted symptoms similar to those Thandi experienced when he referred to a phenomenon called *uthlabo*, from the verb *ukuhlaba*, to 'stab'. He wrote,

Uthlabo is known by causing a sensation of perforation of the side; and the man says, 'I have pain under the armpit, beneath the shoulder blade, in my side, in the flesh. It causes the feeling as if there was a hole there; the pain passes through my body to each side'. (Callaway 1970 [1868]: 268)

This was an illness that could have a natural cause and could be treated with the traditional herbal medicine, *umuthi*. If it persisted after treatment, then the illness was caused by ancestral spirits 'walking in the person' (Callaway 1970 [1868]: 268). This was a sign that the person had a call to become a diviner. Callaway further informed us that the successful treatment of *uthlabo* would make the illness diminish because 'his people are in him. They wish him to dream' (1970 [1868]: 270). Dreams are the primary way of communicating with the ancestral spirits, with the protection and guidance of ancestors considered essential for a good and prosperous life. Dreams are, furthermore, directly connected to pains in the shoulders and upper body, as these are the places in the body occupied by ancestors (Berglund 1989: 98).

The stabbing nature of the winds encountered by Thandi was also an experience of being compromised and opened by metaphysical forces, merging her fate with the metaphysical qualities of the substances carried by the winds. Her experience, despite the pain, was positive. The fact that the winds entered through the chest indicated a positive ancestral intervention. Pain in the chest and shoulder blades is a sign of ancestral presence in the afflicted as the chest and upper back are 'the place[s] they occupy in a man' (Berglund 1989: 115). These experiences were accompanied by oneiric sensations of flight and water, which are associated with lightness, freedom, and cleansing properties.

I have thus argued that the spiritual encounters in Themba's congregation should be interpreted as cultural and historical adaptations to movements through landscapes and exposure to winds. There is, however, a need to theoretically account for this particular interaction with the air and atmosphere in order to bring awareness to other forms of religious engagement with nature and the weather-world.

#### *Umoya and Life in the Weather-World*

Prominent social theorist Tim Ingold has pondered why weather has been so understudied (for example, see Ingold 2005, 2007, and 2011). He argues that the reason for this lack of analytical investigation is that the Western world, since Descartes, has increasingly conceived of life as existing on the external surface of the globe, thus turning humans into 'exhabitants' who are composites of body and mind that reside respectively in a world of matter and a world of ideas (Ingold 2011: 96, 116). In this world of increasingly separate and labeled objects and subjects, the ground under our feet becomes the source of stability and the material subsistence for life, the atmosphere retreating as a passive backdrop through which mobility and olfactory, visual, and auditory perception occur. The surface of the landscape in this modernist understanding of nature marks the limit of materiality, the air for the most part being conceived of as immaterial, an empty space that allows for interaction between human subjects and material objects (Ingold 2005: 103). In short, we have an ontology that places surface before medium and thus misrepresents the intermingled relationship between bodies and the air.

Ingold suggests that we turn this ontology on its head and treat the world as comprised of earthly substances and an aerial medium in which we are immersed (Ingold 2011: 116). Thus, rather than taking the landscape as the surface on which human activities are played out, we should view weather and the earth's atmosphere as the central medium through which most human actions occur. This reversal creates a world where human life, rather than being founded on a solid stable earth, emerges as spun on 'a fragile ephemeral raft' (Ingold 2005: 103). This ties the human experience closer to fluidity, flux, transformations, and transience, which are at the core of spiritual experiences. As such, the ontological reversal Ingold suggests promises to place flux, emergence, and change in the midst of social theory, his ontological reversal fitting well with the fact that air is the foundation of our existence. Without air and breathing, there is no life. In line with Ingold's argument, we could

therefore say that 'air is breathing rather than what a body breathes' (Chapigny in Bachelard 1988 [1943]: ix).

The weather-world is hence the medium through which humans perceptually engage with the external world and thus has the capability to influence perception of and engagements with the world as an emergent process. Air is, therefore, inseparable from life and consubstantial with the sensing body as our 'setting in relation to the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 303). As such, the weather-world has the capacity to 'affect the whole of consciousness' (1962: 136). The lightness and thinness of air is the essence of life and enables movement.

Within this interpretive framework, Zulu Zionist experiences of winds are usually joyful experiences of lightness, freedom, new possibilities, positivity, and growth—encounters which literally 'enwind' the participants (Bachelard 1988: 33; Flikke 2016). The 'mount Zion' I climbed on the first Saturday of every month with the members of Themba's congregation was, despite being located in a severely polluted urban environment, a place of freedom and healing—a place where pollution surfaced as power (*amandla*); an open place exposed to winds where both the auditory and haptic presences of winds penetrated the faithful and filled them with *umoya*. This charged both the spiritual, social, and bodily restoration of the members who were all victims of the country with the largest income disparity, the gap between rich and poor largely drawn along racial lines.

The ritual practices at the mountain and Thandi's experiences and bodily engagements with the weather-world resonate with studies on traditional Greek, Chinese, and pre-Enlightenment medicinal philosophies. Shigehisa Kuriyama, in a comparative study of sensory experiences and descriptions of the pulse in Greek and Chinese medical traditions, critiqued the often taken-for-granted assumption that the 'true structure and workings of the human body are...everywhere the same' (1999: 8). Ideas of the body, he claimed, not only explore different mental constructs or epistemologies, but should be extended to explore differences in sensory experiences (Kuriyama 1999: 60). Ethnographers should therefore be aware that differences in cultural knowledge could potentially manifest as differences in sensory engagements with the world. Thandi's case illustrates that the winds in the Zulu weather-world were not confined to interacting with the surface of the landscape but had the potential, as they blew across and intermingled with the rolling hills of KwaZulu-Natal, to blow through Thandi's body. Her haptic engagement with these winds had the potential to be expressed through her open, spirit-filled, and 'enwinded' body. The winds that pervaded the nooks and crannies of the landscape, mingling with the

thatch of huts creating lively sounds carrying messages from their ancestral protectors and providers, also blew through and interacted with Thandi's body. The haptic style that mediated local relations to the weather-world laid the foundation for a sensorial engagement with the world in which she experienced the winds of *umoya*, so filling her body with the protective ancestral spirits in a time of dire need. This separates Thandi's engagement with the weather-world from a Western ontology, which might have a tendency to brush off such accounts as flights of fancy or sensorial disorders due to trauma. Thandi's experiences do, however, share common ground with spiritual experiences accounted for by Christians up until the Enlightenment.

The Hebrew concept of *ruach* [רוּחַ] (wind, spirit, and breath) came to influence the Christian understandings of *pneuma* in the Septuagint. The Greek terminology for wind and spirit was, however, at best unstable and interpretations were numerous. *Pneuma* bridged the gap between body and soul and between inner and outer winds (see Lloyd 2007). Kuriyama outlined how the discourses on *pneuma* in Greek medicine altered over time (1999: 260). In the Hippocratic tradition, the term initially denoted both 'spirit', 'wind', and 'breath', thus linking the 'inner wind' directly to the meteorological phenomenon experienced by Thandi. Over the centuries, *pneuma* transformed to almost exclusively refer to the internal winds, the soul, before surfacing as the immaterial Holy Spirit in Christian theology. The weather-world was, as the spirit withdrew to an interior, considered private space through the age of reason, simultaneously demoted to an immaterial space where human actions unfold (Ingold 2011).

In this context, it is interesting to note that recent historical studies on meteorology and on European conceptions of the weather indicate an inward retreat of the spirit. I suggest this is visible through changing European sensorial relations with the weather during the Enlightenment. Jan Golinski (2007) gives us some interesting leads on changing British attitudes during this period. His study, which outlines two central themes, supports my argument. First, he points out that meteorology became a national preoccupation and that systematic studies tried to normalize and stabilize what had previously been viewed as uncontrollable. Almanacs (weather diaries) became best sellers, and barometers, developed in the mid-seventeenth century, became an emblem of Enlightenment rationality and a fixture in Victorian middle-class households (Anderson 2005: Chapter 2 and 178). Second, the rational approach separated the weather completely from fears of divine punishment and fears of impending apocalypse which had, prior to this, dominated discourses. This new relationship with the

weather combined with urbanization, improved housing, and clothing, and what Walter Benjamin described as the nineteenth century's addiction to dwelling (separating the domestic sphere as a shell from the outside climate) ensured that body boundaries were further solidified (1999: 220). The body transformed during the Enlightenment into a separate and distinct object; not in terms of what people were, but as something they related to (for example, Harris, Robb, and Tarlow 2013: 172). The European winds that, up until the Enlightenment, were often described as blowing through people, carrying 'particles of air invading the pores of [the] skin' (Golinski 2007: 33), threatening their health and internal balance, became, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, experientially and conceptually confined to blowing around the person (Jankovic 2007: s158). Descriptions of European experiences of the weather disappeared from diaries and Almanacs during the Enlightenment. Golinski's study of weather diaries from the eighteenth-century underscores that diarists in general 'did not present themselves as subject to the weather's influence, but as detached and objective witnesses of it' (Golinski 2007: 90). He furthermore suggests that weather diaries should be understood as an extension of the earlier traditions of keeping spiritual journals (Golinski 2007: 84).

This brief investigation into European changes in conceptions of and experiences with the body and changing sensorial relations to the outside world has not included notations of metaphysical experiences. There are, however, several biblical and theological references that indicate that Western, Christian experiences of and engagement with the weather-world changed dramatically over the centuries.<sup>10</sup> Thandi's interaction with *umoya* as winds and spiritual restoration should thus be interpreted through a closer investigation of the history of the Zulu weather-world and not through solely Western lenses.

### *Conclusion*

As one of the more contaminated areas of South Africa, Umlazi is an environment where one would expect asthma and related chronic

10. 1 Kings 19.11-13 recounts that Elijah climbed a mountain to be with God. He did not encounter God in the storm but in the gentle wind at the entrance of a cave. In Acts 2.2-4, the Holy Spirit arrived with a strong wind which entered the believers who, in response, started to speak in tongues. Finally, Thomas Aquinas in *Summa Theologica* 1, qu. 92, art 1, ad 1, argued that the female gender is formed in the womb by winds entering the mother's body.



diseases to develop.<sup>11</sup> I have elsewhere shown that members of Themba's congregation worked as hospital nurses and were well aware of biomedical explanatory models. However, they also engaged in a ritual quest for alleviation from suffering. In the majority of the cases, these efforts had been preceded by unsuccessful biomedical treatments (Flikke 2006, 2007, 2016). This might be because most of the members of the congregation belonged to the African middle class and aspired to what they considered to be a modern lifestyle. When I met them in the congregation, the quests for bodily and social restorations brought the afflicted to the mountaintop where they were literally 'enwinded' in ways that often paved the way for healing (Flikke 2016). The majority of the afflictions healed by Themba were associated with the internal and external winds of *umoya* which were linked to traditional Zulu notions of pollution attributed to the air and directly linked to the spiritual realm and the influence of Traditional ancestral spirits. It should be noted that this is not the case in all Zionist congregations. In KwaMashu, 20 kilometers north of Durban, Jim Kiernan found that 'very seldom...[was] an offended ancestor cited as the responsible agent' of afflictions (Kiernan 1984: 225).

The significance of the mountain as a ritual place in a heavily polluted, urban landscape emerged through an outline of historical material which revealed that places where winds and material surfaces interacted and came to life have a long-standing significance in the ritual practices of southern Bantu peoples. The winds touching the surfaces of these landscapes created haptic and auditory relations with the spiritual realm. By juxtaposing the historical material with current Zionist practices, the human body emerged as another surface shaped through interaction with the weather-world. The winds encountered during the gusty nights by a cairn in the barren landscape of Umlazi not only made the landscape come alive with sounds of the spirits, but physically blew through the body of the afflicted as through the caverns and caves of the landscape, filling them with enough 'wind' (*umoya*) to heal and restore them, at least temporarily.<sup>12</sup>

In this article I have suggested that within a Zulu cosmology, the auditory presence and the haptic experiences of wind taking hold of the body are ephemeral experiences of unseen forces beyond human control. As such the ritual proceedings by the cairn set the stage for

11. See for example the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance home page: <https://sdcea.co.za>.

12. For more information regarding the success and failure of the healing rituals, see Flikke 2006, 2007, and 2016.

phenomenological engagements with the mountainous landscape as a place that provided a connection between the inner and outer winds of *umoya*. The wind (*umoya*) carried substances associated with the mountain landscape. As the faithful inhaled and expired the air a transformative force penetrated ailing bodies. The external location filled with poverty, violence, and environmental and industrial pollution was, for a short while, subordinated to the benevolent transformative substances, which also were an aspect of *umnyama*, the power (*amandla*) of the Lord-of-the-Sky.

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