

URCSA as an Impossible Community

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Abstract

This article explores the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA), argues it as an “impossible community” and deliberates its existence as an “impossible possibility.” The argument stems from the arrival of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) as a faith, and eventually, a community called a church. The article contends that under normal circumstances, URCSA should not be in existence, yet it has survived for 25 years. The reasons for this survival shall be explored and argued. The Reformed doctrine, church history, and the composition of the church are employed to prove why I speak of an impossible community or an impossible possibility. The reasons provided shall form the basis of why we should celebrate the existence and sustenance of URCSA as an impossible community.

Keywords: impossible community; impossible possibility; colonialism; Christianity; Uniting Reformed Church in Africa (URCSA)

Introduction

The Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA) this year celebrates its birth, existence and survival of 25 years. The birth came about as a meeting of the two “daughter” churches of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). The two “daughter” churches are: the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA), which consisted of members of African origin; and the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC), which consisted of members of coloured origin. The two “daughter” churches were born out of a history of racism, tribalism, ageism, classism, ethnicism and tribalism. It is within this context and history that I refer to the URCSA community as “impossible.”

URCSA was born out of an impossible situation, namely the merger of two denominations. The natural circumstances for the formation of both churches, the DRCA and DRMC, created an environment conducive for a separation of churches or



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a separate church. The coming together of the two without the DRC was an impossible mission from a political and financial point of view. It was impossible during the negotiations for unity to determine or estimate how much time and energy would have to be invested in trying to undo the separation of imperialism, colonialism and apartheid. It was impossible to deny and change our emotions, especially the ones that shaped us at our very core—our rage, loneliness and grief. As the church, we also realised that “so long as there is imperialism in the world, a permanent peace is impossible” (Nasrallah n.d. http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/hassan_nasrallah_579300).

The 1994 unification was both a moment of laughter and anger. Wayne Dyer (Dyer n.d. http://i.brainyquote.com/quotes/wayne_dyer_127372) argues that “it is impossible for you to be angry and laugh at the same time. Anger and laughter are mutually exclusive and you have the power to choose either.” We were faced with an impossible choice to laugh or be angry, informed by our historical realities as being undermined by the white DRC. The DRCA and DRMC chased an impossible dream to exist together, yet their existence was founded in division. There was an impossible task to develop a new church formed by forces of repulsion instead of attraction—a mission impossible. The question of identity and values was at the cross-roads with impossible choices. In this article I will argue that the arrival of the DRC and its faith was an impossible mission, followed by providing reasons why this community is regarded as impossible.

The Arrival of the Dutch Faith

In 1602, on 20 March, a group of Dutch merchants and independent trading companies founded the *Vereenigde Landsche Ge-Oktroyeerde Oostinclische Compagnie*, better known as the Dutch East Indian Company or simply the VOC.

The VOC was granted a government charter, which effectively guaranteed it the right to the spice trade monopoly in East Asia. However, this government charter secured the VOC the power to colonize whichever territory it desired and enslaving the indigenous people according to the market requirements and VOC political imperatives ... Present-day South Africa is no different in this regard. In 1649 a recommendation, called Remonstrantie, was made to the directors of the VOC to establish a refreshment station at the Cape of Good Hope for ships passing it en route to the lands of tea and spices. (DEIC n.d., 1)

What is important to note is that the VOC had the power to colonise. And the driving motivation of colonialism:

...was and is not only in pursuit of material exploitation and cultural domination, but also European self-aggrandizement to compensate for gnawing doubts on the wholeness and integrity of the self that, in different ways and intensity, assail people everywhere. Colonialism from the very beginning was therefore economic, political, cultural, and psychological. Its economic and political motives integral to it all along became more intense and manifested later. Moreover, the fallout of colonialism is multiple and pervasive; its development and expansion affected the thought, behavior and generally

the life of colonized peoples. The methods and agents of colonialism changed, as did its primary *foci* of assaults. (Bulhan 2015, 240)

Colonialism and Christianity are often associated because Catholicism and Protestantism were the religions of the European colonial powers and acted in many ways as the “religious arm” of those powers. Kraemer (1938) goes a step further, arguing the connection between revolution and “mission” work by saying:

The missionary is a revolutionary and he has to be so, for to preach and plant Christianity means to make a frontal attack on the beliefs, the customs, the apprehensions of life and the world, and by implication (because tribal religions are primarily social realities) on the social structures and bases of primitive society. The missionary enterprise need not be ashamed of this, because colonial administration, planters, merchants, western penetration, etc., perform a much more severe and destructive attack. (Kraemer 1938, 342)

Christianity or religion was part and parcel of the colonial project of the VOC. Tanap (n.d., 1) argues that:

For nearly one and a half centuries the Council of Policy wrote millions of thousands of folio pages about matters concerning everyday life at the Cape. The Resolutions cover nearly every subject, for example administration, justice, law and order, education, religion, inhabitants, slaves, visitors, ships and their cargo, the military health services, food, labour, trade (imports, exports and trading with the indigenous peoples), diplomatic relations, expeditions, weather conditions on and offshore, agricultural activities, livestock, nature conservation, land issues, loan-farms and fiscal and financial matters. The Resolutions are the main source of written accounts of pre-modern South Africa.

It must be noted that Jan van Riebeeck did not arrive with ordained ministers from the Netherlands, but only “sick-comforters,” who indirectly performed spiritual care also.

The Resolutions continued to be implemented and as a result, the first Christian school was opened with the purpose of indoctrination and enslaving. In fact, the first school to be opened in South Africa was for slaves. On 17 April 1658, van Riebeeck recorded in his journal:

Arrangements were started for establishing a school for the company’s male and female slaves brought here from Angola by the Amersfoort which had taken them off a prize Portuguese slaver. The sick-comforter Peter van der Stael [Jan van Riebeeck’s brother-in law] of Rotterdam has been entrusted with the task of giving them instructions in the morning and afternoon, besides his duties of visiting the sick, particularly because he reads Dutch well and correctly. To encourage the slaves to attend and learn the Christian prayers, it is ordered that after school everyone is to receive a small glass of brandy and two inches of tobacco. All their names are to be written down and those who have none are to be given names, paired or unpaired, young or old ... all slaves are also being properly clothed to protect them against the daily increasing cold. The strongest have

also been put to work so that they may as soon as possible be of service to the settlement.
(Van Riebeeck 1954, 1)

The sick-comforter was responsible for religious matters until the arrival of Johan van Arckel in 1665 as the first ordained minister. A consistory was formed but still under the control of the classist of Amsterdam. The consistory continued the colonial project.

It was in the 1857 Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church where the impossible community, called the Dutch Reformed Church Daughter Churches, were created. The DRC Synod decided in 1857 about separate services for black members “because of the weakness of some.” The 1857 decision institutionalised racism in South Africa. However, within the Reformed circles, since the Protestant reformation, institutionalisation has been used to impose the agenda of the very organisers and leaders of the institutions, such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and so forth. This was empowering the dominant people groups of our society and perpetuated the marginalisation of minority groups in our society. Black people, by the 1857 decision, were institutionally alienated and excluded by white settlers and colonisers.

The DRC institutionalised racism—even using the Bible to do so. The explanation of Kevin Giles (2016) is helpful to understand the justification of apartheid:

The “biblical” case for apartheid is as follows:

1. The world is predicted on a number of unchanging creation “orders” (i.e. God-given hierarchies, institutions, structures, and relationships), namely, the family, male leadership, the state, work, and race.
2. The Bible teaches that God has created different races. The story of Babel tells us that the separation of people into different races with different languages is God’s will. In Acts 2:5–11; Rev 5:9; 7:9, 14:6, and other passages, the Bible clearly states that God recognises that people are divided and identified by race. For the apartheid theologians, the difference between races trumped any similarities.
3. Acts 17: 26 was possibly the most important text for apartheid theologians. “From our ancestors God made all nations [Greek *ethnoi*] to inhabit the whole earth, and he allocated the time of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live.” This text was interpreted to mean that God had divided all the people of the world into different nations or races and allocated a region for each. They saw this as unambiguous endorsement of the policy of separating the different races of South Africa and allocating an area to each. Acts 17:26 was to them what 1 Tim 2:11–14 is for complementarians. This one text settled the matter. Those who accepted what it said were obeying God, and those who did not, were opposing God.
4. The government has the right to create laws and citizens must obey them (Rom 13:1–7).
5. No possible rational or moral objection can be made to the idea of different races each having their own geographical area to develop separately at their

own pace. [Note the euphemistic language also common in complementarian theology. You would never guess from these words that apartheid theology gave precedence to whites.] (Giles 2016, 1)

This theology was backed by virtually every Reformed theologian in South Africa. The unambiguous and overwhelming support of apartheid by the Reformed churches justified and legitimated the system. The decision imposed systemic racism in practice. The definition of Macpherson (1999) in the Lawrence report is appropriate for my argument: “The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin ... It can be seen or detected in process, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”

The assumed “weakness of some” by the DRC fits the definition of Macpherson (1999). The DRC was in 1857 made to be “*net vir die blankes*” and as a result the white institution. Whiteness became a norm sustaining social privilege of whites beyond that accorded to marginalised others. By virtue of institutionalising whiteness, the DRC then became inherently white; in character, in structure, in religion, and in culture. With such institutionalisation come certain rules of the game, because this is a process of embedding some conception (for example a belief, norm, social role, particular value or behaviour) within an organisation, social system, or society as a whole. Monopoly also becomes inevitable and part of the package. It must be noted that institutionalised religion, therefore, establishes a system for actively believing in an engaging God. The institution, thereby, claims a monopoly on God and this inherently divides people, which is the antithesis of God.

Institutionalisation can also justify, perpetuate, or cover up things like genocide, apartheid, colonialism, imperialism, child and woman abuse, slavery and classism. We must not forget that slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and apartheid brought about the dehumanisation of black people in all facets of life, including church. The treatment of black people in organisations is, therefore, based on the assumption that they are inferior to white people, or even weak. I then concur with Gumede (2018, 1) that “colonialism and apartheid were all-encompassing systems, involving not just individuals but also institutions, professions and the public and private sectors.”

Subsequent resolutions led to the establishment of so-called daughter churches, notably the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (DRCA) (for blacks) in 1859, the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) (for coloureds) in 1881, and the Indian Reformed Church in Africa in 1947.

In relation to Bantustans, Fenwich and Rosenhain (1991) argued:

All Africans were declared to belong to one of the 10 Bantustans, with native language and tribal origins as the deciding factor. In this way, Africans were deprived of

citizenship of South Africa and instead became citizens of the designated homelands. Thus, they had no place or rights in South Africa, but were simply regarded as migrant workers who, if unemployed, had to return to their Bantustan. The old, the young, and the dependent wives were “sent-back” to the Bantustans and whole communities living in South Africa (in the black-spots) were therefore forcibly uprooted and relocated. (Fenwick and Rosenhain 1991, 77)

Guess (2006) argues:

Racism by consequence, operates at the macro-level of society, and represents a historical evolution. It constitutes a gradual shift away from a conscious, almost personalized conviction of the inferiority of an “othered” “race.” Such conviction expresses itself in attitudes of prejudice and is acted out in discriminatory behavior. In its place follow social practices that are essentially depersonalized through institutionalization. (Guess 2006, 61)

Institutions are naturally divisive. The effects of the 1857 decision to create an impossible community became a benchmark and a way in political life. The DRC, as a white institution, institutionalised whiteness as a norm sustaining social privilege beyond that accorded to marginalised others.

The 1857 decision declared the church as an impossible institution because “institutional racism is an assault on the dignity of black people. It undermines their health, causes anger and poisons their personal relations. It causes people to continue to distrust white people, destroying the brittle social cohesion and pushing black people to seek answers in populism ...” (Gumede 2018, 1).

An Impossible Community

Takatso Mofokeng presents an argument on why the church managed to intervene and resolve the six-month strike deadlock at Marikana after the negotiating team comprising Lonmin Mine representatives and AMCU representatives had failed to reach an agreement. The CCMA tried and failed, as did politicians. Mofokeng’s argument (in his speech at the Potchefstroom URCSA Southern Synod day) is that the church managed to intervene and get a settlement between the workers and Lonmin, only after the South African Council of Churches (SACC) intervened through its then President Bishop Joe Seoka. Mofokeng argued that the church managed this because it was an impossible community. His argument is based on the long history of the church, comprising different groupings categorised as racial, ethnic, tribal, class, gender, age, and so forth. He argues that it is in the church where one finds a coexistence of blacks and whites, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, women and men, young and old, heterosexual and LGBTQI-Q, married and single, and so forth. All these categories have existed together within the church since its inception, yet the church has managed to survive these contradictions. His argument is that because of this experience, the church manages to contain and manoeuvre. One can have a theological argument that it is because of the intervention of God through the Holy Spirit. However, the reality is, under normal

circumstances, the church should not be in existence based on the natural contradiction it was built on; thus the connotation that it is an impossible community. Let me go further and explain this experience using Karl Barth (1936) and Reinhold Niebuhr's theology of impossible possibility (quoted in Hunsinger 1993). Hunsinger (1993) argues the contrast between Barth and Niebuhr in this fashion:

Niebuhr exemplifies the kind of theology which thinks in terms of the real and the ideal. Niebuhr thought of love, for example, as representing an unattainable ideal. Although impossible to attain, the love ideal had at least two important functions. It served constantly to remind us of human sinfulness, and it stood as a warning against identifying any human achievements or institutions with the absolute. It was a critical standard which (without ever losing its status as an imperative) disclosed that human beings, no matter how hard they might try, would always fall short. Love, for Niebuhr, thus had to be described as an "impossible possibility," for human nature as such determined what could be called "real." Niebuhr's concept of the real was grounded in his anthropology of sin so that love, being unattainable in its essential fullness, could only be conceived as a critical but elusive ideality ... [and] Barth by contrast, thought in terms of the real and the unreal. Whereas Niebuhr's thinking about "reality" was anthropocentric, Barth's was theocentric. It was God who set the terms for what was real. Anything opposed, hostile, or contrary to the reality of God was "unreal" by definition. Therefore, for Barth the "impossible possibility" was not love but sin. Sin (and sinful human beings) existed in a netherworld of unreality. Sin's origin was inexplicable, its status was deeply conflicted, and its destiny was to vanish. Meanwhile, it was actually there and had somehow to be taken into account, but (being essentially absurd) it could only be described in paradoxical terms. It was an impossible possibility and an unreal reality. (Hunsinger 1993, 39)

Impossible possibility is a reality that transcends the everyday real, a truth deeper than all else we have been told is true, a story that stretches beyond and encompasses all stories so as to give them meaning, integrity, and purpose.

But this is a doctrinal matter identified, argued and clarified by Augustine ("De Natura et Gratia" n.d.) and John Calvin (*Institution Christianae Religionis* n.d.). We are born into a corrupted, divided, and sinful world, at least in the Augustinian and Calvinistic sense. In *De Natura et Gratia*, Augustine (n.d.) argues:

Man's nature, indeed, was created at first faultless and without any sin; but that nature of man in which everyone is born from Adam, now wants the Physician because it is not sound. All good qualities, no doubt, which it still possesses in its make, life, senses, intellect it has of the Most High God, its creator and Maker. But the flaw which darkens and weakens all those natural goods, so that it has need of illumination and healing, it has not contracted from its blameless Creator-but from original sin, which is committed by the free will. (Augustine n.d., 3)

Sin exists first as an impossibility; a reality of inconvenience to the original plan of God, that is, a life without sin. Yet, the fall of Adam created the impossibility as a possibility.

And this impossibility called sin, affects the community, the whole humankind. Joshua P Steele (2015) argues:

Just as sin is an ontological impossibility, disunity is an ecclesiological impossibility. The tension between the undeniable reality of sin and Karl Barth's theological definition of sin as an impossible possibility parallels the tension between the obvious reality of a fractured church and the theological definition of the church as the one body of one Christ. In order to describe in Barthian terms what it means for church disunity to be possible only as sin is possible. (Steele 2015, 1)

Steele took his view from Barth (1936) when he argued at the 1937 Second World War Conference of Faith and Order in Edinburgh that:

... we have no right to explain the multiplicity of the churches at all. We have to deal with it as we deal with sin, our own and that of others, to recognize it as a fact, to understand it as the impossible thing which has intruded itself, as guilt which we must take upon ourselves, without the power to liberate ourselves from it. We must not allow ourselves to acquiesce in its reality: rather we must pray that it be forgiven and removed, and be ready to do whatever God's will and command may enjoin in respect of it. (Barth 1936, 22–23)

Barth expresses the “multiplicity” of the churches indirectly, implying the disunity and division of the church.

John Calvin was influenced heavily by Augustine as his primary source of reference in the Institutes of Christian Religion. However, Calvin tries to create an “escape clause” by making a distinction between body and soul. He argues:

Hence although the soul is not the man, there is no absurdity in holding that he is called image of God in respect of the soul ... By the term image of God is denoted the integrity with which Adam was endued when his intellect was clear, his affections subordinated, and when he truly ascribed all his excellence to the admirable gifts of the maker. And though the primary seat of the divine image was in the mind and the heart, or in the soul and its powers, there was no part even of the body in which some rays of glory did not shine ... at the beginning the image of God was manifested by light of intellect, rectitude of heart, and soundness of every part. (Calvin n.d., Inst. 1. 15.3)

An Impossible Possibility

I should start by arguing that the 1990 meeting and the changes of the Church Order Articles by the DRMC and the DRCA were an impossible possibility, as this meeting had to bring two denominations together, including their Church Orders. This exercise and journey were never easy and continue to show within URCSA. The Church Order of the new church to be formed became a point of discussion, which brought about possibilities and impossibilities. The reality is that the denominations operated with two different and separate Church Orders that needed to be reconciled to form a new Church

Order. The Church Order is a fundamental document that captures the faith and legality of the existence of the church in the Reformed family or faith. According to Kgatla (2011, 3) quoting NGKA Akta of 1991: “The first eight articles of the proposed Church Order were accepted without much discussion, but article 9, concerning the calling and retirement of ministers, and the representation of congregation at the presbytery level and Regional Synod,” caused problems.

However, there were other matters excluding the Church Order that were to be discussed and agreed on, such as church property as “nearly all Church buildings and all immovable property were registered in the name of the NG Kerk” (Kgatla 2011, 4). The other matter involved the calling of ministers, with each church having a different tradition. The two churches had to eventually agree that “calling” and “interview” systems would be utilised or incorporated into the new church. The issue of leadership had to be discussed, as both churches from Presbytery levels to the synods had leaders that would have to be changed or merged. These are but a few of the impossible possibilities that a new church had to take into consideration, including cultural and language differences.

By implication, this means that the celebration of 25 years of the existence of URCSA is by itself a celebration of the impossible. The amalgamation of two churches and its sustainability in 25 years has been an impossible journey, because we are an impossible existence, impossible history, impossible reality, and we are an impossible community.

My argument is concluded in synergy with that of Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) that:

Community is calibrated on death as on that which it is precisely impossible to make a work (other than a work of death, as soon as one tries to make a work of it). Community occurs in order to acknowledge this impossibility, or more exactly—for there is neither function nor finality here—the impossibility of making a work out of death is inscribed and acknowledged as “community.” Community is revealed in the death of others; hence it is always revealed to others. Community is what takes place always through others and for others. It is not the space of the egos-subjects and substances that are at bottom immortal—but of the I’s, who are always others (or else are nothing). If community is revealed in the death of others it is because death itself is the true community of I’s that are not egos. It is a communion that fuses the egos into an Ego or a higher We. It is the community of the other. The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as community, establishes their impossible communion. (Nancy 1991, 15)

The “I” becomes dead into the “We” as it is incorporated into a community. It is, however, not assimilation as to assimilate to a new culture; one is asked to set aside the beliefs and expectations to follow what is desired in their “newness”—in the “We.” Incorporation, unlike assimilation which is a forced situation, is an action when and whereby individuals unite or are brought together voluntarily into a new formation or entity called the “We” or a community.

In a Christian context, we are then brought together as a community by an impossible law of the Bible and liturgy prescribed as the greatest commandment of the impossible community. Matthew 22:37–40 carries an impossible mandate to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself! All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” “The social contract of which Hobbes and Rousseau wrote has been an argument forced between absent selves to speak of the fact that once they met, and may also do so again, or that they have met, they might or should one day do so” (Tapp 2010, 152). We gather together as a community to form part of a voluntary agreement and forfeit our individual, cultural, racial, class, theological and political beliefs and rights in favour of the wider community. According to Tapp (2010):

Community is, then, a coercive concept, designed to remind us of our obligations to others, rather than a descriptive account referring to an actual state of affairs. Loss, absence, and separation are among our earliest memories, and we erect a whole edifice of social relations to conceal the bare facts of the real physical experiences of absence, and the wish that it were otherwise. Not just social structure or society, then, are virtual, but community itself. (Tapp 2010, 52)

We are coerced by the love of God, and ourselves and our neighbours to become this impossible community. This love is also problematic as we are expected to love “others” as we love ourselves. This love is equally impossible, as it is unconditional love. First, I argue that one is impossible (i.e. as we are not in a position to love that way). For example, to love the DRC unconditionally without justice is an impossibility. Secondly, unconditional love is probably irrational because it expects us to forgive and forget the sins of the past by our colonisers and oppressors; this is our historical and theological dilemma. It is impossible and irrational to forget that we do not own land and are poor because of the DRC. It is impossible and irrational to forget that whites are privileged. The love of God in this narrow sense can be applied nonsensical and may be simplified. However, the reality is, the love of God is a challenge. Carson (2000), in his book titled *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, exposes those challenges:

In the cultural rush towards a sentimentalized, sometimes even non-theistic vision of the love of God, we Christians have sometimes been swept along to the extent that we have forgotten that within Christian confessionalism the doctrine of the love of God poses its difficulties. This side of two world wars; genocide in Russia, China, Germany, and Africa, mass starvation; Hitler and Pol Pot; endless disgusting corruptions at home and abroad—all in this century—is the love of God such an obvious doctrine? Of course that is raising the difficulties from an experiential point of view. One may do the same thing from the perspective of systematic theology. Precisely how does one integrate what the Bible says about the love of God with what the Bible says about God’s sovereignty, extending as it does even over the domain of evil? What does love mean in Being Whom at least some texts treat as impossible? How is God’s love tied to God’s justice? (Carson 2000, 15)

However, the challenges and questions about the love of God are not the *alpha* and *omega*. We are hoping for a different reality. Indeed, we are hoping for a different future with decent human existence full of love and justice. It is no accident that after Jesus' departure this first Christian community structured and organised their communal and material life in the manner in which Acts 4 relates (Mofokeng 1988, 38). It is in Act 4 that we are told that "from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." This is the community of love we are promised and are wishing for. This is realised in a community called the church.

Conclusion

What is very clear from the beginning is that URCSA was born out of impossibility. Firstly, URCSA as a reformed church was born into sin as per the Augustinian and Calvinistic theology, a doctrinal impossibility to have a pure community. This is the beginning of our theological problem. Secondly, the arrival of the white man in 1652 gave us the Bible and took our land. This transaction was problematic and it should not have been the case that we accepted this transaction and the teachings of this church—yet it happened, an impossible possibility. Thirdly, the first school in 1658 was established for slaves by the sick-comforter, Pieter van der Stael, when pupils (mainly adults) were instructed Christianity and others were rewarded for their presence with a glass of brandy and two inches of tobacco daily. This should have been impossible for us to adopt this faith, yet it became possible. Fourthly, the 1857 decision on the exclusion of some because of their "weaknesses" should have warned us not to be a part of this church—yet we are still members of this church, an impossible possibility.

The conclusion to belong to an impossible community is only understood in terms of grace and African theology. Gabriel Setiloane (1979) explains belonging to this impossible community and impossible possibility, arguing that we are still members of it because we are simply bewitched.

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