Reflections on the Making of the *AmaBandla Ama-Afrika Exhibition* (2011-2012): Martin West's Soweto Photographs

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The *AmaBandla Ama-Afrika Exhibition* opened in August 2011 at the Centre for African Studies Gallery of the University of Cape Town (U.C.T.) and moved to the Albany Museum in Grahamstown in 2012. As curator of this exhibition of photographs taken by Martin West in his years as a doctoral research student working in Soweto, I was presented with a range of archival and curatorial challenges which this preface to the following photo-essay on the exhibition seeks to address.

I first met with Martin West in 2009. He self-effacingly expressed a desire to donate a large collection of photographs to the Manuscripts and Archives Department of the University of Cape Town Libraries. He also wished to have his photographs digitized for research purposes. The tone in his voice was matter of fact. The photographs were a by-product of his anthropological research in Soweto during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He spoke about the collection as if it were one those tasks you do when you retire, move house, or clean up an office. In his case it was all three.

My next encounter with Martin was a few months later when I went to collect two boxes of photographs at his home in Cape Town. One was of prints, the other of negatives. In both cases they were carefully ordered and inserted in small envelopes with labels. He provided contact sheets of the images with pencil ticks alongside those he deemed important. He offered me a cup of green tea. This was the beginning of a relationship and a journey. Cups of green tea became our ritualized way of beginning conversations about his remarkable collection of photographs of African Independent Churches in Soweto. Alerted to the phenomenon of the growth of the Independent African Church movement by Beyers Naude, founder of the Christian Institute, West set out to understand the social ties and ritual practices of these under-researched religious communities. His investigation culminated in a U.C.T. doctoral thesis supervised by Monica Wilson. It was published with a preface by her in 1975 under the title *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City: Independent Churches in Soweto, Johannesburg*.[1]

Our conversations re-ignited my own interest in African Independent Churches. I became especially interested in these forms of indigenized spiritual practice after 1994. The Independent Churches had become part of my research and documentation into spirituality in South Africa, the topic of my Master's dissertation at Duke University. This later became a book and exhibition called *Moving Spirit* in which I commented:

1 Martin West, *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City: Independent Churches in Soweto, Johannesburg* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1975).

> Beyond the afterglow of our post-apartheid moment in South Africa, the reality is unsettling. Liberation and democracy have not freed the majority of black citizens from poverty. AIDS, crime and other social aberrations are on the increase. As the global and regional contexts converge, spirituality takes on a new meaning. What the world professes to value and what it really is are profoundly out of sync. Globalization has very little to do with the oneness of spirituality. Access to information does not mean peace and consciousness. If anything, globalization has accentuated the need to pursue spiritual answers, beyond the material and the profane.[2]

Although we photographed in different periods, much of what Martin West had observed during his research and captured on camera was similar to my own later research experiences. Our common interest established a platform by means of which we sought to understand and re-imagine his photographs in a contemporary context. The easy part in working with a photographic archive is the technical side. One draws up an inventory of the donated materials and stores it where it finds its appropriate place alongside many other collections only to wait to for researchers with an interest in the broad field. The difficult part is digitizing or scanning images that become the 'best of', 'remembered', or 'selected' versions of a collection. In this case I was faced with the task of editing a collection of several thousand photographs down to just a few hundred. This tested my skills as a curator. Who makes the decisions about what to scan and what to leave out? What images have value as historical records, even in cases where they are aesthetically problematic?

I followed Martin's original plan. I read his 1975 book and began with the photographs that he had included in the published work. Then I selected those additional images that he had ticked on the contact sheets. On a few occasions where I felt the image he had chosen was too similar to others before and after, I left them out. To this I added photographs which I considered to be arresting, unusual, or ones that simply added historical interest to the collection. In a few instances where photographs were taken in low light and had been uprated, considered too problematic to print in the past, I included them knowing the capacity of the modern scanner to extract detail out of shadow areas.

After many months of work, armed with a hard drive, and feeling slightly trepidatious, I knocked on Martin West's door again. After the green tea I was relieved to discover that I had hit the mark. Apart from a few images I had left out, Martin agreed with the selections that I had made. These became our 'final' collection. It was suitably a process of call-and-response in the parlance of the African Independent Church with the role of the preacher being taken by that of the photographer and the audience being replaced by the curator.

We now began the work of crafting a visual narrative for the exhibition around these selected images. Our narrative began by setting the photographs in the context of Soweto before 1976. Following Martin's book, it went on to identify the division between the Ethiopian movement and the Zionists, ending with the intense and less intense experiences associated with the Christian rituals of ecstasis and baptism. We decided that each section should have contextual and personal quotes to complement this visual storyline. We agreed that we would include a plasma screen to show the

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2 Paul Weinberg, *Moving Spirit* (Cape Town: Double Storey, 2006), 54.

film made by the later famous director but then U.C.T. social anthropology student David Fanning along with colour slides in power-point format.

It was only once I began to work with each of our selected images in a detailed technical way that I was struck by what an exceptional body of work this actually was. Buried away for almost forty years, this collection allowed for a re-imagination in post-apartheid South Africa of the spirituality of relatively marginalized communities and of a meeting point between colonial and African value systems. Martin's photographic collection presents a window on a world that dances between indigenous values and the Christianity brought by colonists. As John and Jean Comaroff understood, this dance would change perceptions and values indelibly. '"Margin" and "metropole" recast each other as Africans and Europeans, plural both. They came to mark their similarities and dissimilarities, to inhabit and inhibit one another's fantasies – and taken-for-granted practices.'[3]

The struggle for the land was deeply entwined with the struggle for the 'heathen' soul. While South Africa today is a country where the Christian faith is predominantly practiced, links to an indigenous past are still very apparent. The Institute for Natural Resources has shown, for example, that 84 percent of South Africans consult a traditional healer more than three times a year, after or in place of going to a western medical doctor.

The Ethiopian and Zionist movements which Martin West studied both had their origins in the late nineteenth century. The Ethiopians originated as breakaways from mission churches. They sought independence for essentially political reasons, while remaining close in all other ways to their original churches, often using the same liturgy and structure. Their leaders could (and today still can) be identified by their black robes. Many churches have names explicitly identifying their ancestry, such as the Presbyterian Church of Africa, the Bantu Methodist Church, the Zulu Congregational Church and so on. The anthropologist Jim Kiernan wrote of the paradox of missionary work. Once converted, the African Christian found himself or herself in a state of 'benign apartheid', he argued, 'with the insistence on segregation and white superiority'.[4]

The other group were the 'Churches of the Spirit', known mainly as Zionists or Apostolics. They encompass a wider variety and are identified by their colourful uniforms and concentration on healing, prophets and spirit possession. They express a syncretic blend of African tradition and Christian practice. The Zionist movement has split into many groups. Today there are some 4000 such churches with a following of one-third of the African population in South Africa. At the time of West's research, between 1969 and 1971, the largest concentration of these churches was in Soweto. As he observed, they ministered to the poor and marginalized. He established an open relationship with these followers.

> 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. The same applies to photography. When I started taking pictures, they would stop and pose and after

3 John and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. 2: The Dialectics of Modernity on a Southern African Frontier* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 7.

4 Jim Kiernan, 'The African Independent Churches' in Martin Prozesky and John de Gruchy, eds., *Living Faiths in South Africa* (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 1995), 117.

a while they got used to my style of taking images on the run. I gave people pictures, and they saw that as an act of friendship and we developed a trust.[5]

West used the camera as a means to draw people closer and break down barriers rather than as a tool of control, alienation and distancing.[6] His photographic approach was simple. His photographs provide a sense of immediacy rather than a sense of distance. His work concentrated on activities and the spiritual practices. He used a through the lens metre system, which had just come out at the time. It allowed for more spontaneity than a handheld separate light metre. It meant that he could photograph, focus and take a reading all at the same time. This was considered a major advance for those working in the photo-journalism and documentary photography in this period. His technique also worked against the more traditional 'portrait' style photography so long associated with anthropological and ethnographic photographs.

His first results from the local photo laboratory were disappointing, but with support from the Revd Danie van Zyl, who worked at the Christian Institute and had a keen amateur interest in photography, he learnt the art of developing and printing his own materials. Because of the sensitivity of the rituals he was observing, he always preferred to use natural light. 'Wherever possible I avoided using a flash, both for aesthetic reasons and to avoid being a distraction during services.'[7]

Martin West's interaction with the congregants of these churches took place shortly before the Soweto uprisings of 1976. Forty years later his photographs offer an extraordinary reflection on the community at that time. Another by-product of his research was the documentary film *Amabandla Ama-Afrika* that he made in collaboration with David Fanning. Fanning would go on to produce many award-winning documentaries on South Africa and insights into flash-points around the world. He has served, for a number of years, as the executive director of Frontline, a documentary feature programme of public broadcasting in the United States.

The exhibition, both physical and virtual, is a re-imagination of material that could well have remained buried in a suburban home. West had sensitively documented a community of practitioners that for its own spiritual survival had 'closed the curtain on the world'.[8] He photographed in an environment that had for all intents and purposes been off limits to white South Africans. His 'exposure' of Soweto from the inside, from the perspective of the spiritual and the social, is an exceptional narrative by one who turned out to have a great gift for documentary photography. His photographs, as much as his text, were part of what Monica Wilson prophetically described in her preface as 'an addition to our knowledge of the dynamics of contemporary society and a means of extending understanding and sympathy in the midst of revolution.'[9]

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5 Paul Weinberg interview with Martin West, Cape Town, 15 May 2011.

6 For discussions of photography functioning in the latter respects, see especially John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographs and Histories* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988) and in the southern African context, Wolfram Hartmann, Jeremy Silvester and Patricia Hayes, eds., *The Colonising Camera: Photographs in the Making of Namibian History* (Cape Town, Windhoek and Athens, Ohio: UCT Press, Out of Africa and Ohio University Press, 1998).

7 Paul Weinberg interview with Martin West, Cape Town, 15 May 2011.

8 Paul Weinberg interview with Martin West, Cape Town, 15 May 2011.

9 Monica Wilson, 'Preface' to Martin West, *Bishops and Prophets in a Black City*, ii.

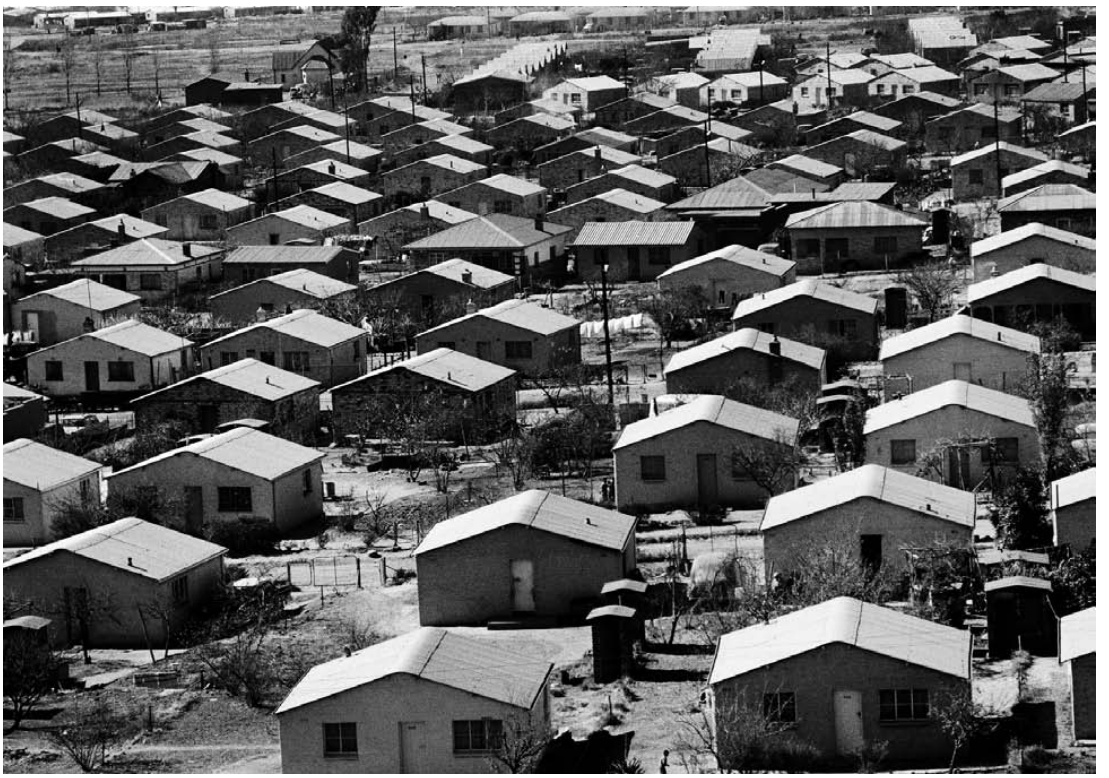

Figure 1:
Matchbox houses. Athough Soweto in the early 1970s had a variety of housing from shacks to a few middle-class homes, the vast majority of people lived in what were not inaccurately called 'matchboxes'.

Figure 2:
Old Pimville after rain. These were the worst conditions in Soweto at the time. Pimville was demolished in the early 1970s. 'A church leader living in Pimville in a large dilapidated house said to me [West], "Don't mock my house – it educated my children." He was referring to rental income from some rooms – impossible if you were living in a matchbox.'

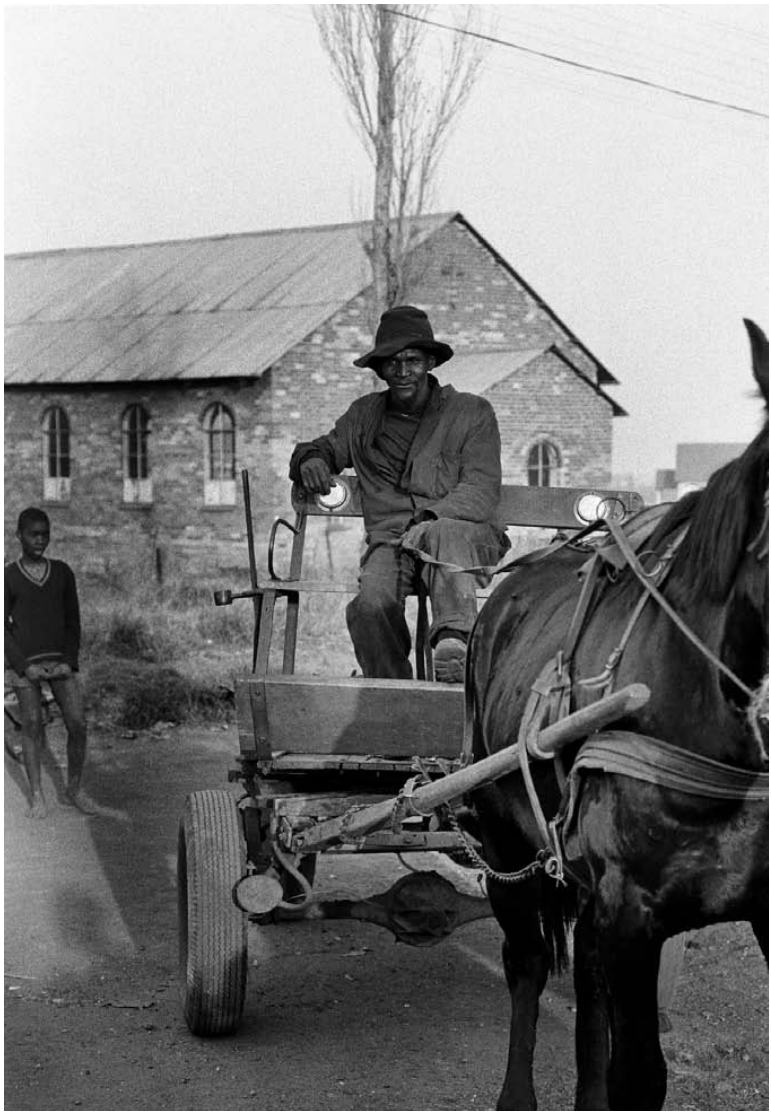

Figure 3:
Coal seller – there were a number of horse-carts around Soweto in the early 1970s.

Figure 4:
A procession of the African Free New Church, a breakaway from the Anglican Church.

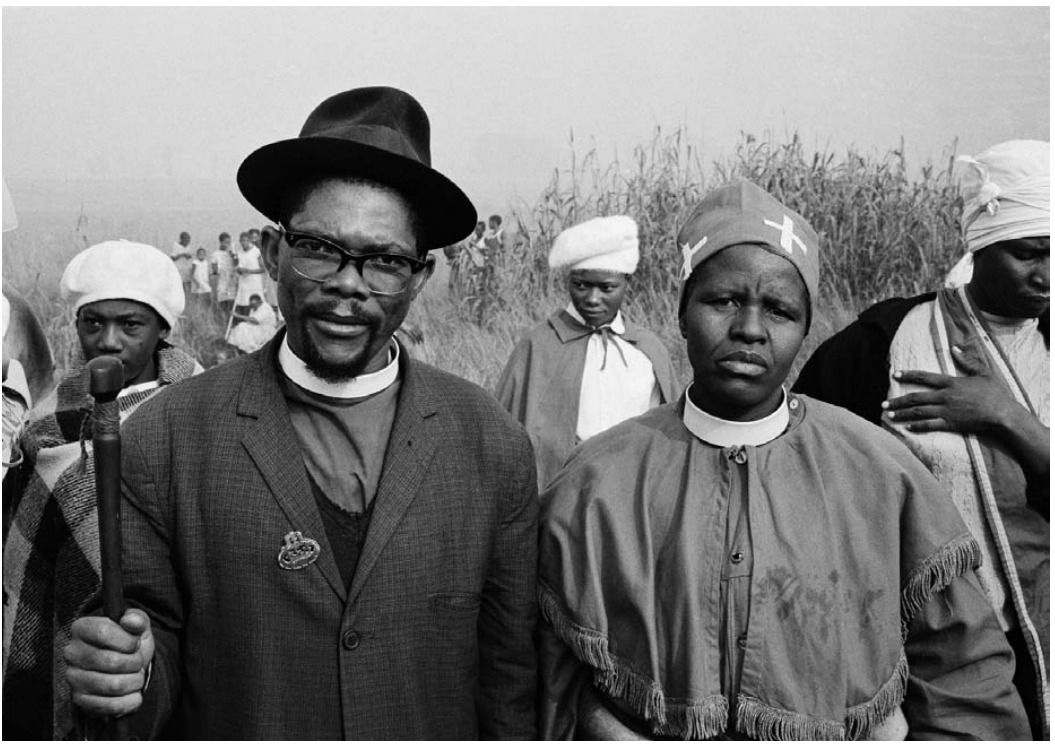

Figure 5:
Two ministers attending an early morning healing rite at the river outside Soweto. 'This was the only occasion that I [West] encountered a woman as a fully-fledged Minister in the African Independent Churches.'

Figure 6:
Women's *manyano* meeting at 1397 Mofolo North, held at the home of Mrs Mdletshe, Lady President of the African Congregational Church (Gardner Mvuyana). Most churches had women's prayer groups, known as *manyanos*, which have traditionally met on Thursdays, the domestic workers' afternoon off.

Figure 7:
A child being possessed at a service of the Apostolic Full Gospel Mission of South Africa.

Figure 8:
Bishop J.P. Zwane blessing a child during Sunday service at the Bethlehem Apostolic Church in Zion.

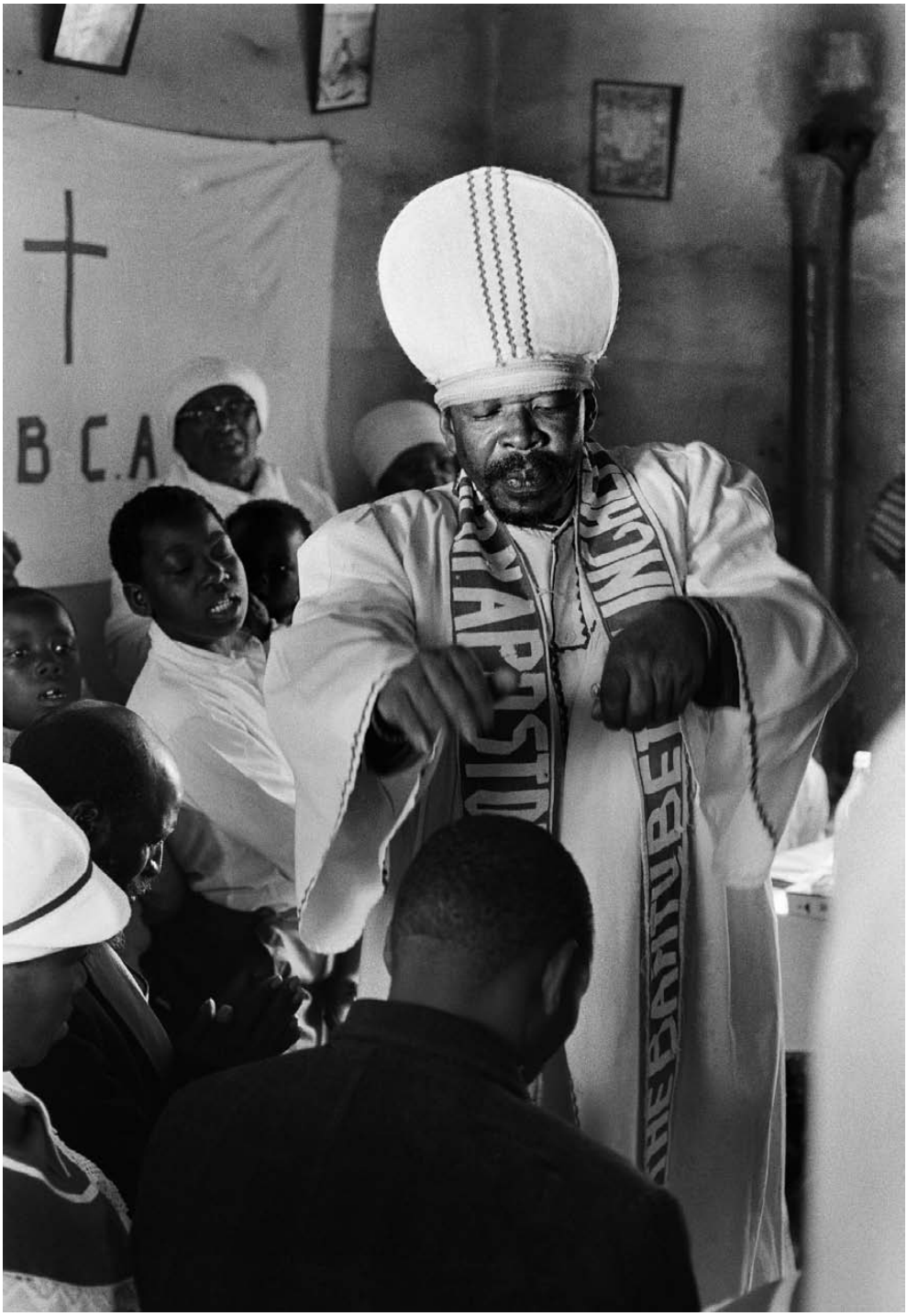

Figure 9:
Archbishop M.P. Radebe of the Bantu Bethlehem Christian Apostolic Church of SA praying for a sick congregant at a Sunday morning service.

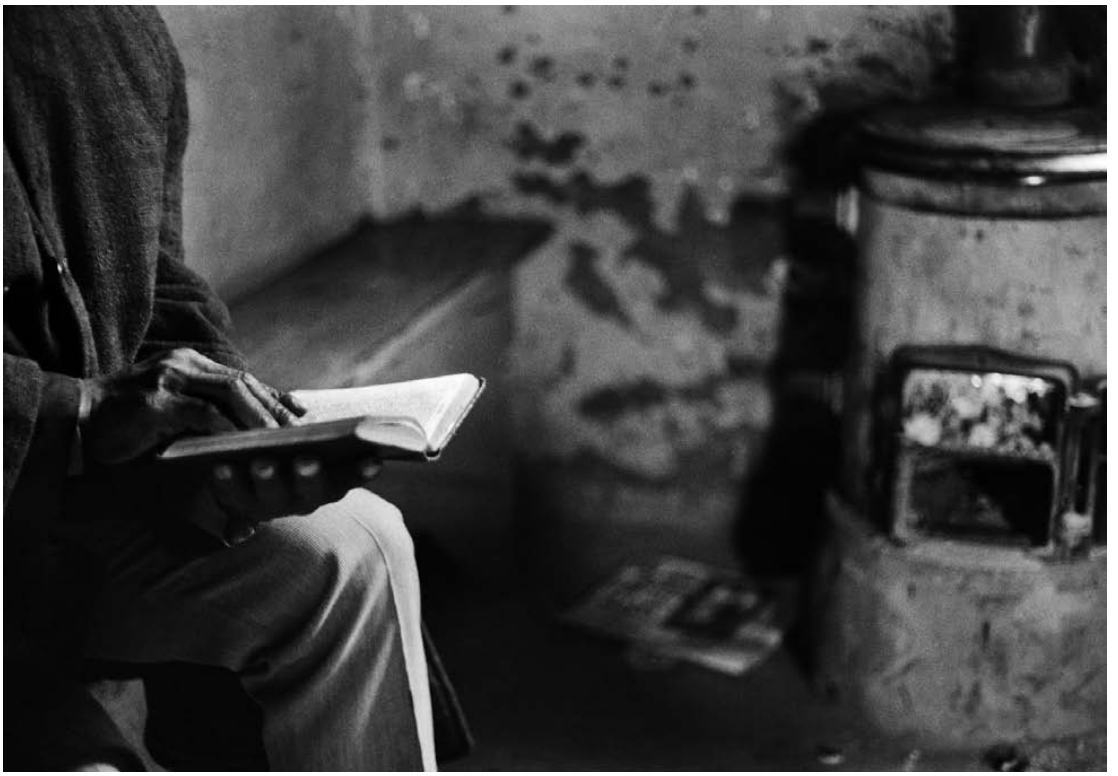

Figure 10:
Morning Bible reading at the headquarters of the Bantu Bethlehem Christian Apostolic Church of SA.

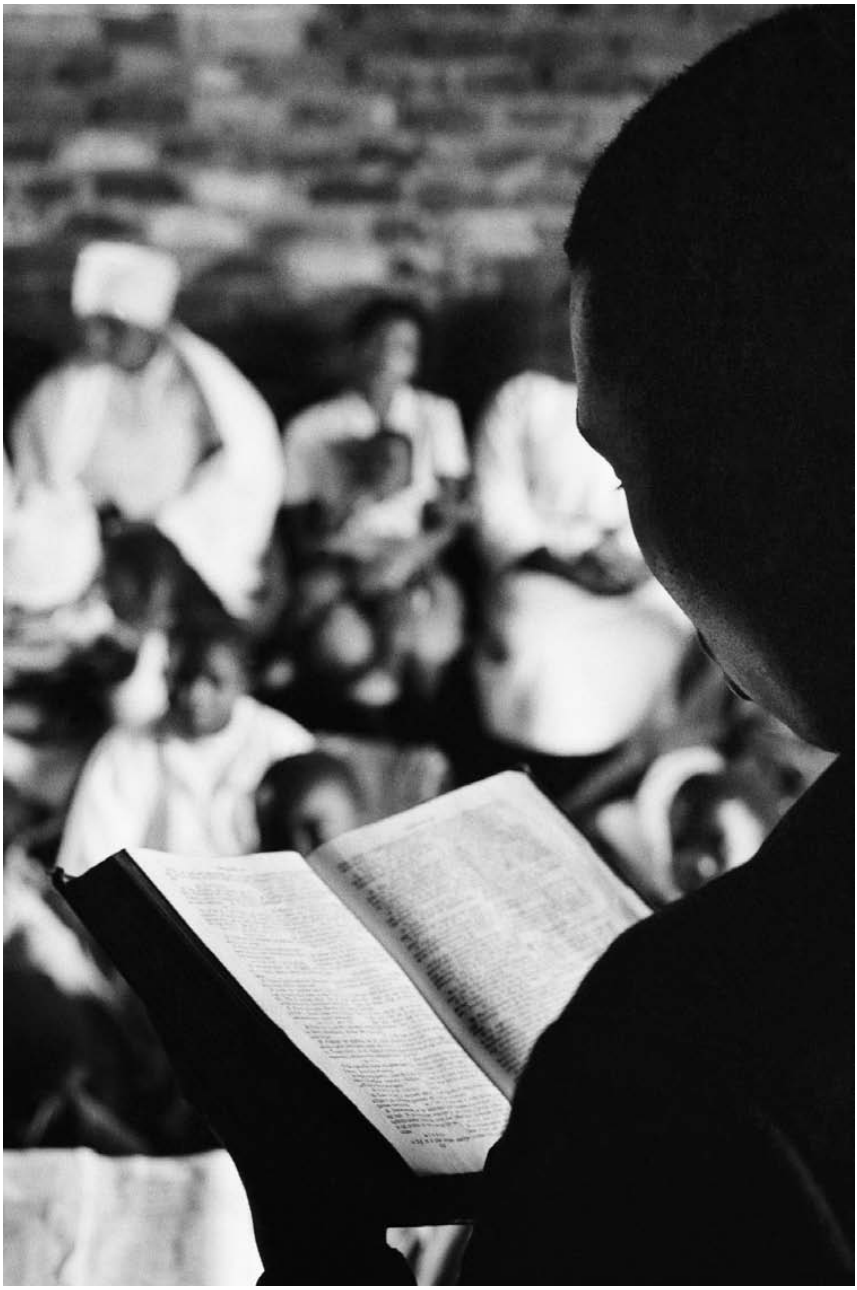

Figure 11:
Reading the lesson at a Sunday service of the Bethlehem Apostolic Church in Zion.

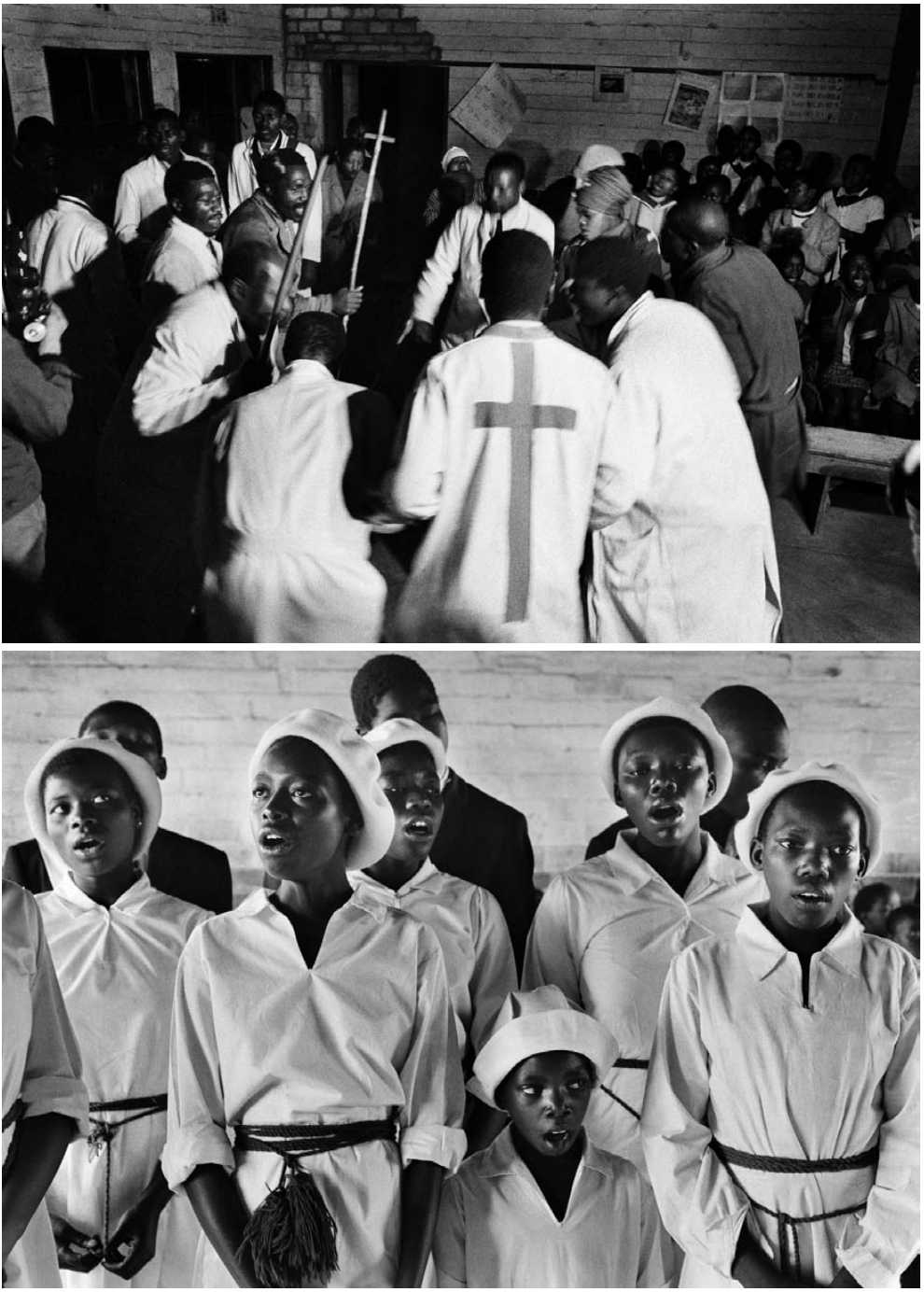

Figure 12:
Church members dance at a consecration service, summoning the Holy Spirit.

Figure 13:
Choir members of the Holy United Methodist Church in SA.

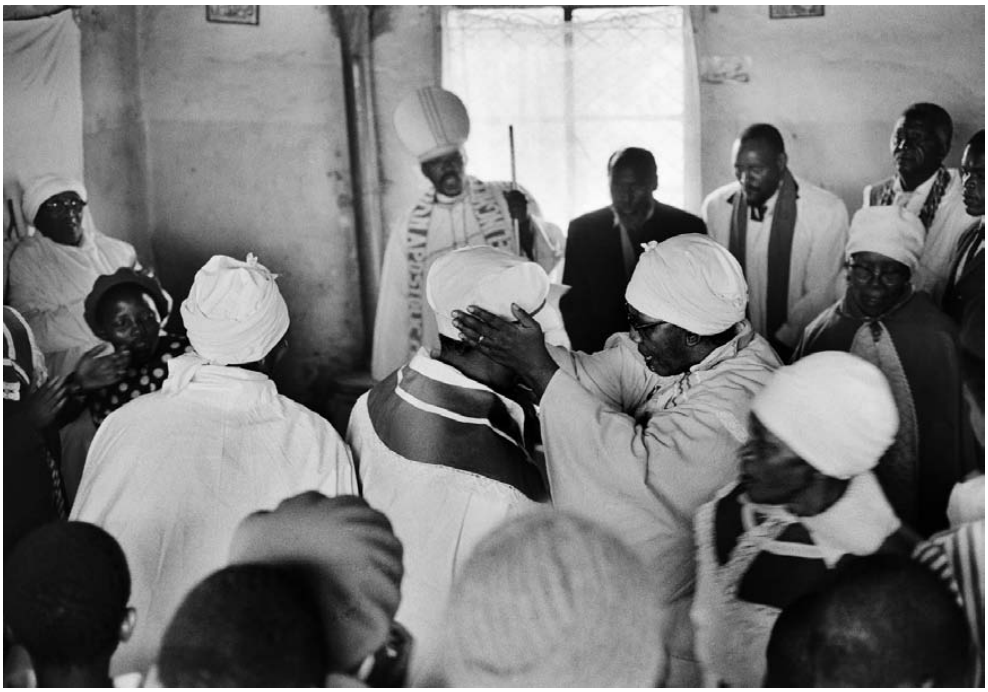

Figure 14:
Special Sunday service of the Apostolic Full Gospel Mission of South Africa to celebrate the 100th birthday of one of its members, seen here just above the drum, held in a marquee at her home.

Figure 15:
Lady Archbishop and Prophet Mrs L. Radebe of the Bantu Bethlehem Christian Apostolic Church of SA healing a member of the congregation while other congregants dance in a circle around her, summoning the Holy Spirit.

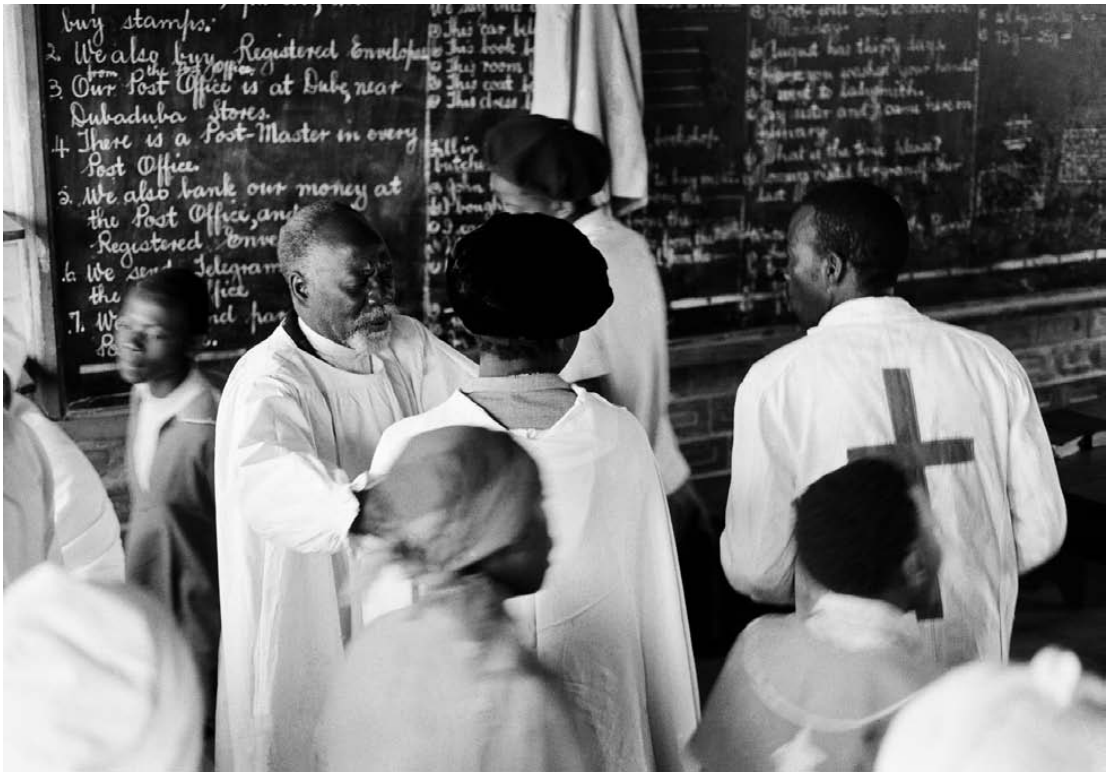

Figure 16:
Bishop Malinga of the First Catholic Apostolic Church in Zion of SA healing a member of his congregation during Sunday service in a school classroom.

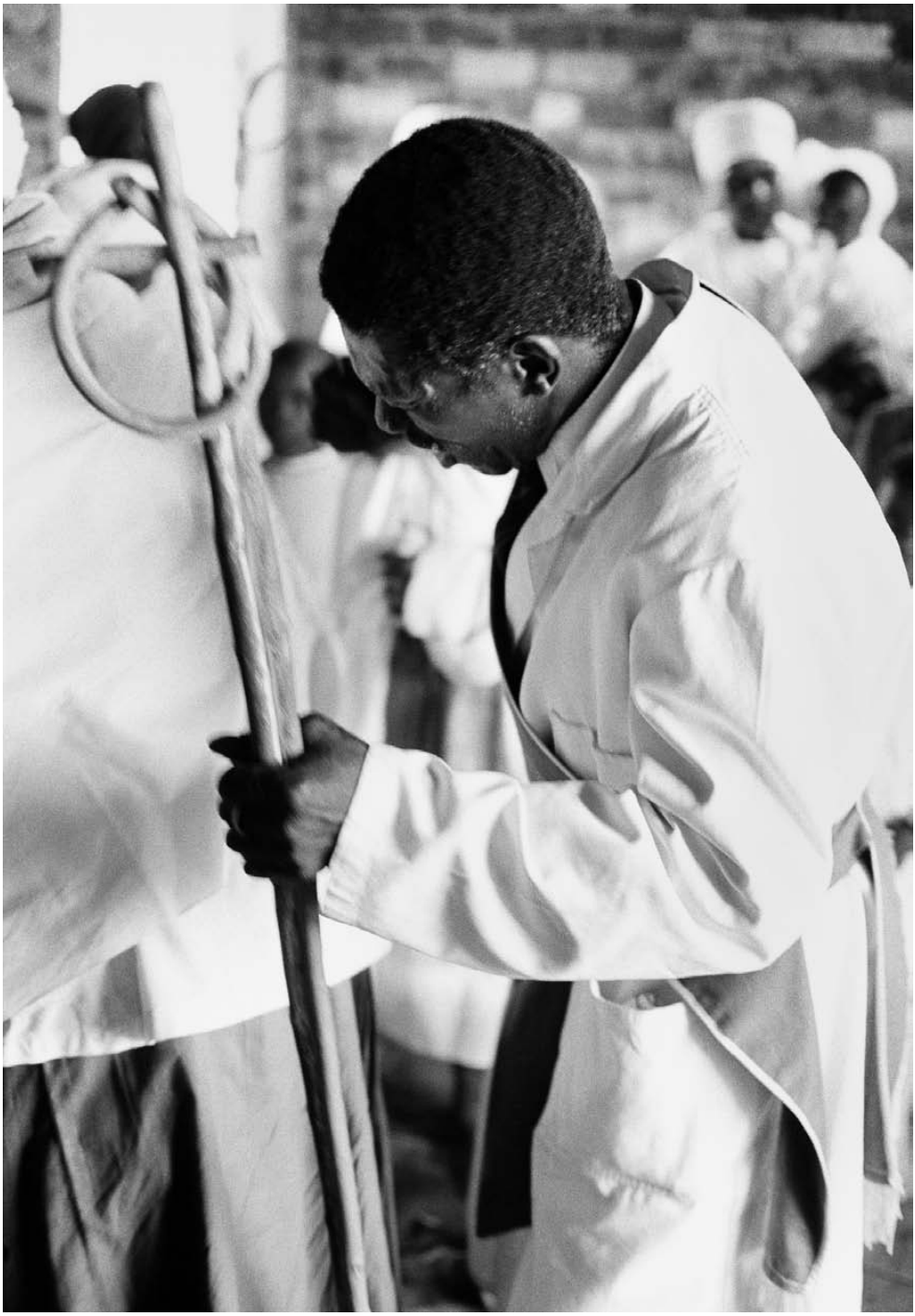

Figure 17:
A member of the Bethlehem Apostolic Church in Zion dancing during a healing service.

Figure 18:
Shoeless in Zion. Domestic workers leave their shoes behind as they enter holy ground for a Zionist prayer meeting on the outskirts of Hillbrow, Johannesburg.

Figure 19:
Zionists approaching a river on the outskirts of Soweto at dawn. Zionist churches conduct baptisms by triune immersion and healing services involve multiple and often vigorous immersions.

Figure 20:
Healing rite, early morning on the outskirts of Soweto.

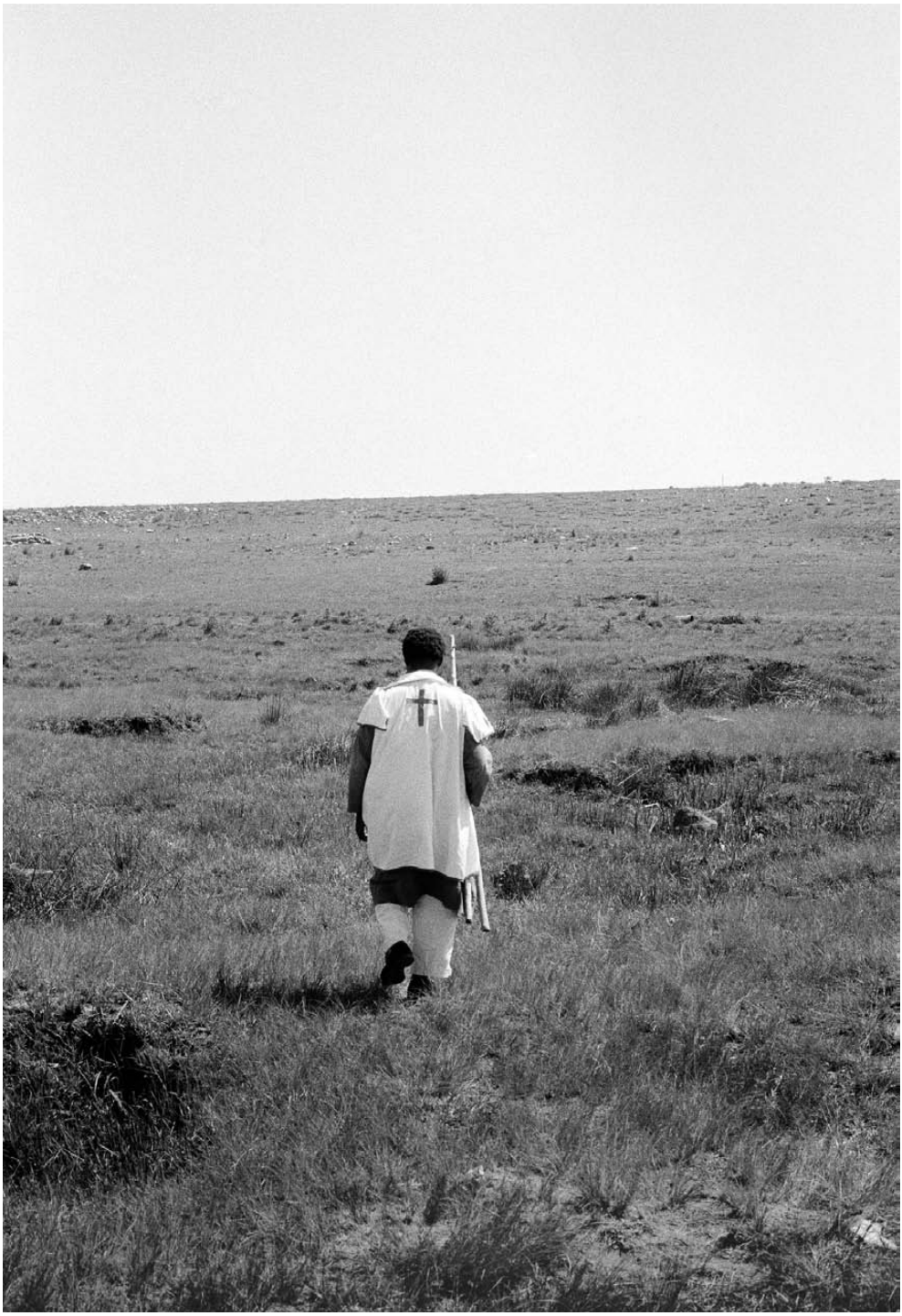

Figure 21:
Nunc dimittis: 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace …' – Luke II, 29.