

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 31		
Title of case study: Illuminating African Zionism in the UK and South Africa		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 1 Jan 2015 – 31 Dec 2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Dr Joel Cabrita	Lecturer in World Christianities	Jan 2013 – Dec 2018
Period when the claimed impact occurred: June 2017 – Oct 2018		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Cabrita partnered with photographer Sabelo Mlangeni to curate accessible and visually powerful exhibitions to communicate the significance of the Zion Christian Church, a church of over 12 million members but little understood outside. Her principal impact has been four-fold: (1) increasing social and cultural awareness by deepening public understanding of Zionism in the UK through an exhibition at Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology; (2) increasing understanding of Zionism in South Africa through an exhibition in Johannesburg's Wits Art Museum, by offering a non-colonial, insider perspective which brought new audiences into museum spaces; (3) providing South African and UK artists with new inspiration for their portrayals of religious communities, as well as enriching artistic institutions by enabling them to challenge historic colonial attitudes; (4) enhancing community cohesiveness by giving Zionist individuals and groups in South Africa material for reflection on their origins and identity.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Cabrita's research carried out at the University of Cambridge explores the importance of Zionism – a Christian faith-healing movement unrelated to Jewish Zionism – in shaping the religious, cultural and social history and identity of South Africa. Although it has millions of members, Zionism is frequently ignored by both scholars and the wider public. Cabrita's research on Christian Zionism in Africa reclaims this significant movement from obscurity, demonstrating how Zionism played a central role in the major transformations – racial segregation, industrialisation and labour migration – that created modern South Africa. Her work traces how Zionism was founded in the American Midwest in the 1890s, but quickly spread to South Africa and became vastly popular there [R2, R3, R4]. With around 12 million members today, Zionists comprise the largest Christian group in Southern Africa.</p> <p>Despite this vast numerical presence, Zionism is surprisingly understudied by scholars. Zionists' disengagement from formal politics has contributed to their being neglected by scholars who focus on more conventional narratives of black resistance. Zionism's invisibility in public discourse has resulted in the anomaly that many South Africans are almost entirely unaware of the origins and nature of their country's largest religious movement. Zionists themselves, moreover, suffer from a paucity of accurate information about their history and identity. Internationally, their existence is almost unknown, with most only associating the word 'Zionism' with the drive for a Jewish nation-state.</p> <p>Addressing this invisibility of Zionism, Cabrita's work has used extensive archival and oral history research to show how early twentieth-century Zionists in the American Midwest – mostly socially-marginalized northern European immigrants and African-Americans – founded a utopian community called 'Zion City' where conventional medicine was renounced in favour of faith healing [R4]. She has also shown how early Zionists aspired to create a community transcending social, ethnic, racial and gendered distinctions, through their new identities as residents of the heavenly 'Zion'. Zion City became famous as one of the first multi-racial religious communities in the USA, with African-Americans occupying prominent positions [R2].</p>		

Cabrita's research has also demonstrated how Zionism expanded into South Africa in 1904 via missionaries and the church's literature. She argues that Zionism became spectacularly popular in the context of the worsening racism of the colonial and apartheid states [R1]. The movement's initial success amongst African Christian peasant farmers in areas like the small town of Driefontein inspired a vision of human society as egalitarian and colour-blind despite the racist strictures of the colonial state. This adoption of Zionism, and exchanges with American Zionists in the United States, were part of the movement's broader efforts at a pan-racial solidarity unconstrained by ethnicity or geography, an increasingly difficult endeavour as the century progressed [R2, R5].

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [R1] Cabrita, J. (2014). An introduction to the letters of Isaiah Moteka. *Africa*, 84(2), 163-198. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R2] Cabrita, J. (2015). People of Adam: Divine healing and racial cosmopolitanism in the early twentieth-century Transvaal. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 57(2), 557-592. [\[DOI\]](#)
- [R3] Cabrita, J. (2017). Revisiting Christian 'translatability' and African Christianity. In S. Ditchfield, C. Methuen, A. Spicer (eds.), *Translating Christianity (Studies in Church History)* (pp. 448-475). Cambridge University Press. ISBN: 9781108419246
- [R4] Cabrita, J. (2018). *The people's Zion: Southern Africa, the United States and a transatlantic faith-healing movement*. Harvard University Press. ISBN: 9780674737785
- [R5] Cabrita, J. (2018). Christian Ecumenism, Swazi nationalism and a unified church for a unified nation, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 44(2), 283-298. [\[DOI\]](#)

As the publisher names and journal titles indicate, this research is all of international quality, and meets the 2* minimum requirement.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

To address the lack of understanding of Zionism, Cabrita chose an ethically sensitive way of presenting to South African and British publics a perspective on Zionism that emerged both from her and from someone 'within' the religious community. She collaborated on two exhibitions with the photographer and Zionist practitioner Sabelo Mlangeni, whose 60 photographs of Zionists were quiet, personal and intimate portrayals of the community from within, focusing on everyday aspects of Zionism, rather than its more spectacular rituals.

4.1. Impact on public understanding in the UK

The Cambridge exhibition (Jun-Sept 2017), titled *Amakholwa: The longing of belonging*, was held at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA). Cabrita intentionally selected the MAA in order to address critically British stereotypes of African religiosity, within the context both of Britain's long colonial relationship with South Africa, and of the colonialist tradition's influence on how museums such as MAA exhibit non-Western artefacts. These modes of exhibition are considered increasingly problematic by curators, ethnographers and artists located on the African continent – with one curator at the Wits Art Museum characterising the traditional approach as "exotifying" African religiosity [E11].

Cabrita and Mlangeni therefore decided to create greater space for Mlangeni to present Zionism on his own terms. The Cambridge MAA exhibition displayed 60 of Mlangeni's photographs of Zionists, accompanied by two information text panels. Pushing back against an anthropological tradition of Western 'specialists' as curators of non-Western societies, as well as invoking recent debates in South Africa on the politics of language translation, Mlangeni and Cabrita provided photograph captions in isiZulu only with no English equivalent, and included only brief historical and contextual information on Zionism in the text panels. This ensured that Mlangeni's photographs would be the final authority on Zionist identity for the purposes of this exhibition, thereby avoiding the impression that this was a conventional ethnographic exhibition 'about' Zionists rather than personal testimony of a member of the religious community.

This exhibition was viewed by 5,107 British and international visitors. Five outreach sessions in parks across the city encouraged young people to respond to the exhibition; 119 people came into contact with these sessions, with 16 choosing to make collages from magazine images and text [E1]. 52% of the visitors who completed follow-up questionnaires stated that it

was their first acquaintance with African Zionism. One commented, “I was not aware that such a religious movement was active in South Africa”; another stated that the exhibition “had introduced me to a new world”, and yet another that “it was enticing to engage with strange and unfamiliar things” [E1]. The exhibition also served to distinguish African Zionism from Jewish Zionism: one person stated that they now realised that “Zionists [in South Africa] are not to be confused with [Jewish] Zionism” [E1].

Furthermore, Mlangeni’s intimate portraits of everyday Zionist life transformed audiences’ perceptions of African religion, leading viewers to see Zionists less as an exotic ethnographic ‘other’, and more as a relatable community of ‘believers’ (the title of the exhibition). One visitor appreciated “see[ing] preconceived ideas of African religions broken and contemporary living represented.” Another responded positively to the isiZulu-language captions: “it is not always good to be told about an image, it is often interesting to work things out for yourselves” [E1].

Through Cabrita’s research and the exhibition resulting from it, therefore, many visitors in the UK not only became aware of the Zionist Church for the first time but reflected critically upon the stereotypical ways in which African religion is conventionally perceived.

4.2. Impact on public understanding in South Africa

The Johannesburg exhibition (Jun-Oct 2018), titled *Umlindelo wamaKholwa* (‘The night vigil of the believers’), was held at the Wits Art Museum (WAM). In the context of the ‘Decolonize the Curriculum’ movement, WAM has been censured for featuring white curators and academics pronouncing on African society and history. Critically engaging with these sensitivities, Cabrita, Mlangeni and the WAM curators highlighted the nature of the exhibition as Mlangeni’s own personal perspective on Zionism from ‘within’, as well as making the exhibition as accessible to ordinary South Africans as possible (e.g. by, this time, including translations of the IsiZulu text panels). To ensure that the exhibition represented a diverse range of perspectives, Kabelo Malatsie, a young black female curator, was engaged to work alongside Cabrita and Mlangeni in conceptualizing and staging the exhibition.

The WAM exhibition therefore deliberately engaged with as broad a spectrum of audiences as possible, catering especially for low-income visitors who would not usually visit museums, as well as engaging intentionally with Zionist audiences by hosting Zionist church choirs for a festival at the museum. 200 Zionist singers from Johannesburg and Driefontein came to the museum for the first time, and were brought into contact with visual reflection upon their faith which is rarely, if ever, present in South Africa’s national public discourse. In total, over the eight-week duration of the exhibition, it received 9,413 visitors, 149 of whom attended the two public “talkabouts” and 162 who visited the museum for the choral concert [E11]. It was the most visited exhibition of the ten hosted by WAM in 2018; one has to go back to an Andy Warhol exhibition in July 2017 for better WAM attendance [E2]. The catalogue also ensured that the exhibition’s images reached as diverse an audience as possible: 250 catalogues were produced, including four essays by curators and scholars and a dialogue between Mlangeni and Cabrita. Twenty catalogues were distributed to WAM guides; two were given to *The Market Photo Workshop*, a photography school in Johannesburg for low-income students; eight were given to the libraries of disadvantaged schools in Johannesburg to extend their coverage of religious studies; 50 were donated to the Zionist choir members to share with their local faith communities.

Through this activity, Cabrita’s collaboration with Mlangeni transformed perceptions of Zionism. A security guard working at the museum commented on this: “I was used to seeing them, but I didn’t understand them ... but now [my] perspective changes ... I was in a shell and then it cracked open. I’m a new man now” [E3]. Another person commented that they “know the Zion Church [from before] but now [their] insight is deeper and exclusive” [E3].

The exhibition also enabled audiences to perceive Zionism as a space for unity amidst social, racial and religious diversity. A choir member remarked, “[the exhibition] has changed us in a way. I ... have realised that we are different from other Zionist [but] Zionist are united individuals therefore I’ll keep that in mind that we do not discriminate even if we meet other Zionists we become one” [E3]. The exhibition showed the importance of Zionism in South African society. As one visitor commented: “it has made alert of the diversity of the different church groups ... we need to be aware of the different religious heritages of South Africa which play big roles in our communities particularly in peoples’ identities and different views of God. It is a good show that really changed my perspective on Zionism/Christianity within black communities” [E3].

In addition to the exhibition and the public talkabouts, an educational programme was developed to enable 2,584 schoolchildren to visit the WAM exhibition. Of these, 51% came from disadvantaged schools, and their otherwise prohibitive transport costs were sponsored. The programme encouraged pupils to reflect on the role of religions in society and in private life, thereby critically engaging with a subject not taught in state schools in South Africa. Learners particularly reacted to the exhibition's visual character, one pupil emphatically responding that "I was here at the exhibition yesterday but I came back again ... I wanted to come back and understand more about what the pictures were showing. The pictures explain everything" [E3].

The exhibition and attendant activities therefore brought into a usually elite, white-dominated space a great range of new audiences, radically expanding the museum's reach into economically disadvantaged sectors of society. The exhibition also challenged audiences to recognize the importance of Zionism within the diversity of South African culture.

4.3. Impact upon artists and artistic institutions

These photographic exhibitions also allowed Cabrita's research to engage with and impact both artists and artistic institutions. For example, collaborating with Cabrita led Mlangeni to connect his work to the larger history of Zionism. He credits that "it was also throughout [our] conversation where I started to think [my] work can take another direction ... There were things that when it comes to the history of the church, I didn't really know about and somehow through her research, I've learned ... I started to think of the work in that way ... not just a personal history." [E4] Through Cabrita's work, therefore, Mlangeni reconceived his photographic art and vocation.

Cabrita's research also enabled career progression opportunities for Mlangeni and other black Africans in the arts. Commissioning Mlangeni to exhibit two shows at prestigious museums led to positive press recognition and reviews in major media outlets including *Mail & Guardian*, *The Sunday Times*, *Business Day*, *Art Africa* and *City Press* as well as other social media [e.g., E8]. Mlangeni also cites his exhibition at MAA in Cambridge as a key moment of international recognition, leading to him being awarded the inaugural Africa MediaWorks Photography Prize in 2018 [E4]. Additionally, a Zionist and a seamstress, created installation clothes for the exhibition, and exposure of her work in the exhibition led other Zion churches to commission her to design and sew their church uniforms [E5]. Partly as a result of the positive media publicity she received via the exhibition, the curator, Malatsie, was subsequently appointed as director of a prestigious arts organization (the Visual Arts Network of South Africa).

Additionally, in placing black African religious experience centre-stage, Cabrita's research had a positive impact upon the dynamics of racial exclusion and inclusion in art institutions in South Africa. The WAM exhibition attracted a diverse range of viewers who had previously found such spaces exclusionary. WAM's Visitor Services Facilitator remarked that many Zionists "think the museum is prim and it's for certain classes, and races and too academic as well. So to see an exhibition of Sabelo's – and remember that Sabelo is an artist not an academic – they felt welcome, they felt that connection immediately [...] But exhibitions like this help to transform our spaces by having young black professionals coming into the space" [E6]. One visitor also shared that "we've come specially to support another black contemporary artist" [E6]. The WAM exhibition marked a clear shift in the demographics visiting the museum. Another museum employee commented, "we've embraced a new audience we hope will visit and share that other communities have access to [the museum]" [E3]. A curator noted that "non-traditional audiences were actively and creatively engaged" [E11], and that the exhibition's success lay in "particularly demographics of who came to the exhibition and related events" [E12].

The exhibition therefore significantly advanced the careers of three black artists, and transformed Mlangeni's conception of his work. It enabled WAM to engage with new audiences, challenging the museum to maintain and expand further the demographics of their constituency.

4.4. Impact upon Zionist Communities in Johannesburg and Driefontein

For many Zionist visitors to WAM, engaging with the exhibition was a first occasion for more critical reflection on their faith. One Zionist stated, "Photos are teaching me something new – new things I've learned that we don't do at our church ... Teaches me about Zion other churches"; another realised through the exhibition that "It is possible to praise God in different ways", and still another "thought different", as a result of the choral event, about "the unity of the church" [E3]. Mlangeni stated that his engagement with Cabrita's work led him to ask new questions of his faith: "when we grow up in Christian families, as I did, we don't get to question

things. You can't ask why and going into the history of the church is something we hardly do" [E7].

For many Zionists who visited the museum, this public platform also provided affirmation of their religious identity. One member said, "I saw a lot of people were very excited about Zion church. It made my faith stronger to see the work we've done" [E3]. A choir performer shared that "Zionism isn't taken seriously however these platforms allow people to share their existence – allows for access to the church. Apart from this experience Zionism is 'absent' / invisible ... The platform that WAM supplies allows the ideas about the group to be exposed" [E3]. One of the Zionist schoolchildren commented: "it makes me feel proud about my church to see the respect shown for our religion and for our culture. It makes me happy. We don't see much about the Zion church in the news or elsewhere. We're not known – most people don't understand us" [E3]. The leader of the choir at the choral event remarked, "the fact that we performed at WAM is an amazing experience". One observer said that he "never thought you'd see a Zion exhibition around" [E3]. Mlangeni also appreciated the platform for his faith that the exhibition provided after the extensive and very positive press coverage of his work [e.g., E8].

The exhibition's impact reached many more Zionists than just the visitors to WAM. As well as the 50 exhibition catalogues circulated to church members, the choral event was filmed by a YouTube channel and the video has been viewed over 15,000 times, reaching wider publics through this digital platform. Illustrating how the YouTube video encouraged international circulation of the exhibition, one viewer commented that "I like this South African nation, we are proud of you ... I'm a Zionist here in Botswana" [E9]. Another spoke of the pride that watching the exhibition and choral event online elicited in them, saying, "I'm really moved, Zion is moving up the ladder" [E9]. Sibusiso Sibeko, the director of the choir festival and a Zionist, commented how the exhibition presented opportunities for renewed self-reflection within Zion churches; he described the exhibition as "ground-breaking", expressing the hope that it would have a "ripple effect" prompting reflection on "how further can we take this, what else can we do?" [E10].

The exhibition has therefore had a major impact on the huge Zionist community, in its affirmation of their religious identity and of the community's place in South African society.

In conclusion, Cabrita's research, via the pathways of the exhibitions co-curated with Mlangeni, has therefore had international reach, has made significant impact by enabling institutions (especially WAM) to reach new audiences, and has had clear impact on the understanding and faith of individuals.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [E1] Harknett, S.-J. (2018). *Kholwa Exhibition Evaluation report, Autumn 2017*. Artthrob.
- [E2] Exhibition visitor numbers, WAM, 2017-2018.
- [E3] Interview transcriptions: public engagement events, WAM, Johannesburg.
- [E4] Interview transcription: Sabelo Mlangeni interviewed by K. Wheeler, 22.10.2018, Johannesburg.
- [E5] Chapter: Cabrita, J. & Mlangeni, S. (2020). Photography and religion in anxious Joburg. In N. Falkof & C. van Staden (Eds.), *Anxious Joburg*. Wits University Press. ISBN: 978-1776146284.
- [E6] Interview transcription: Visitor Services Coordinator, WAM interviewed by K. Wheeler, 6.10.2018, Johannesburg.
- [E7] Exhibition catalogue: Cabrita, J. (Ed.). (2018). *Umlindelo wamaKholwa*. WAM.
- [E8] Newspaper article: Moloi, N. Umlindelo captures the insider's view from without. *Mail & Guardian*, 06.07.2018.
- [E9] YouTube video page with comments: UMLINDELO WAMAKHOLWA: [\[Link\]](#).
- [E10] Interview transcription: Director of the choir festival interviewed by K. Wheeler, 6.10.2018, Johannesburg.
- [E11] Report on Umlindelo wamaKholwa by the Curator (Strategy, Planning and Development), Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg.
- [E12] Email correspondence: Joel Cabrita and the Curator (Strategy, Planning and Development), Wits Art Museum, Johannesburg.