

# EMPTY CHURCH

A Film by Andreas Uranowicz

PRESS BOOK



Uranowicz Film presents

# EMPTY CHURCH

A Film by Andreas Uranowicz

Documentary Short, Germany 2025, 23:04 Minutes, 16:9, color

## CREW

Directed, filmed, written & produced	Andreas Uranowicz
Editor	Andreas Uranowicz
Sound & Mix	Markus Gram
Grading	Yannick de Decker
Voice-Over	Stephan Rambinintsoa
Translation & Subtitles	Tiavina Nomenjanahary
Production	Uranowicz Film
Supported by	Ministry of Culture North Rhine Westfalia, Stiftung Kunstfonds



## SYNOPSIS

The Lutheran Church runs Toby Ambohimahazo, a remote exorcism center near Antsirabe, Madagascar. In this area, people believe that mental illness is a form of spirit possession. Pierre, a man imprisoned for smoking weed, lives at the center with about 200 others deemed "possessed". Rivo, the lead exorcist, holds daily religious rituals to save people through Jesus. The documentary gradually reveals repetitive routines as a reflection of institutional control. These rituals high-

light the spiritual intensity that sustains the community, but also the quiet suffering of the people inside. The story of healing through faith shifts when Pierre is abused and mentally harmed, while Rivo desperately searches for a real case of possession.

"EMPTY CHURCH" is an observational examination of a spiritual system in which belief and nature become a burden on vulnerable lives.

## DIRECTOR ANDREAS URANOWICZ

Andreas Uranowicz is a filmmaker, film editor and new media artist with a background in media design. He has worked with notable editors such as Monika Schindler and Nils Pagh Anderson, as well as acclaimed directors like Philip Gröning and Ai Weiwei.

As a director, Andreas is focusing on social justice and environmental issues. His films were screened at several international film festivals. In 2018, Andreas won the Best Editing Award at the ISFF Izmir for his work on 'Everything is fine', a short film directed by Metehan Sereflioglu. The following year, he was the editor of the feature film 'Because We Dreamt of Flying' directed by Lilian Erlinger, which premiered at the Hof International Film Festival.

In collaboration with the German embassy, Andreas exhibited 'The Colors of Ancient Egypt', the first new media exhibition at the Egyptian Museum in 2018. Andreas is based in Berlin.



### FILMOGRAPHY

- 2018 TAVY
- 2020 Round About
- 2024 Between Stones
- 2025 Empty Church





## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

My research for this project began in 2013, when I was living in Madagascar and exploring the country and its cultures. During that time, I learned of a “Toby” – a Christian healing center where people with mental illness and disabilities are treated through exorcism. Although I was aware that such practices exist in some religious communities, I never imagined that I would encounter them so directly, nor on such a large, institutional scale.

One of the largest of these centers is located in Antsirabe and houses more than 200 individuals who are believed to be possessed by the devil. Here, exorcists attempt to cast out demons in the name of Jesus through prayer, confinement, and ritual. The existence of these institutions is deeply rooted in Madagascar's religious history: Beginning in 1866, Norwegian misso-

naries introduced Christianity, gradually replacing the traditional ancestor cults. Where spiritual imbalance was once attributed to ancestral displeasure, it is now often interpreted as demonic possession. As a result, mental illness, disability, and even environmental events continue to be framed through a spiritual and moral lens.

When I first encountered the Toby in 2013, I was horrified by what I witnessed. People were being exploited, isolated, and subjected to inhumane conditions, not because of medical diagnoses, but because of belief systems imposed upon them. The normalization of such treatment, embedded in social and religious consensus, deeply disturbed me. It confronted me with the unsettling reality of how misunderstanding and fear



can become institutionalized.

It took seven years to gain the trust of the church authorities and receive permission to enter and film inside the center. This long process forced me to confront complex ethical questions about authorship, representation, and responsibility. My primary concern throughout the filming process was to avoid causing further harm to the individuals confined there. The visual and narrative approach of the film is therefore deliberately restrained, observational, and careful not to sensationalize suffering. My intention with this project is not to pass simple judgment on faith, but to expose a reality that remains largely invisible to the outside world. Madagascar has virtually no adequate mental health care infrastructure. Only a handful of trained psychiatrists serve the entire island. In the absence of medical support, religious institutions have taken on this role, often with devastating consequen-

ces. This work is both a document and an appeal: a call for visibility, dialogue, and a more humane and informed approach to mental health. Through this project, I hope to generate awareness, disrupt silence, and contribute to a broader conversation about belief, power, and the fundamental dignity of every human being.

## INTERVIEW WITH ANDREAS URANOWICZ

### **What led you to make EMPTY CHURCH, and what do you hope to achieve with the film?**

To be very blunt, the first thing I saw in 2013 in that place was the abuse of people. I was simply shocked by how large-scale and institutionalized it was to the point that people in society actually believe they have to send their children there if they have a disability or are mentally ill. After I returned to Germany, that memory kept coming back to me and I couldn't come to terms with it without telling this story through a film.

It's especially significant for the Christian world to watch what missionary work has passed on, how far they have allowed things to go, how people are treated, and what they have in fact inherited. Besides the 2.3 billion Christians worldwide, I believe we should question power structures in general. For that reason, the film is of interest from a historic, societal, and religious viewpoint.

I understand the criticism that a European shouldn't go tell stories in Africa from their perspective. But I still have to say that I view the actions of the missionaries, which were Europeans, critically and what they passed on. Society in Madagascar, friends of mine, the translator who was with me, believe in this institution and believe that people are being helped and healed there. Simply because there are no alternatives. There are very few professional psychiatrists in Madagascar. According to recent sources, there are about 14 practicing psychiatrists nationwide. Society is so heavily biased that it can no longer assess the situation objectively. There is no space and probably even fear to voice

criticism of how people are treated. In that sense it is necessary that a voice from outside this construct be allowed to address the issue.

### **Why does the film repeatedly refer to animals and nature?**

The Toby is located outside the city, and you walk about fifteen minutes into the mountains through small villages. It is surrounded by nature, and basically the only thing opposing this institution is nature, which at first seems insignificant.

But when you see how people are treated, chained in the garden, growing vegetables that they themselves don't even get to eat, or making furniture from wood, it becomes clear that these people are being exploited and in some ways treated like slaves who are still forced to work for the institution. Even the benches in the church are carved from trees and made by them, as if they are actively taking part in building their own suffering. That's where the idea came from that nature is part of it, because the people are essentially victims of everything. They have had everything taken from them, every right to exist and all their freedom.

### **What does the film's title mean?**

The title refers, in a way, to what happens in the film. The place reveals and deconstructs itself. The viewer realizes that the place has no real substance, and that everything Rivo, the exorcist, says is not solid or grounded either. Through this lack of substance, the church in this institution becomes just a hollow shell without



### **How do dramaturgy and film style work together?**

Visually, I tried to protect the sick people and those in chains by not filming them from the front. I decided to shoot wide shots outside of the church chose a slower rhythm, while inside the church manipulation is taking place. There is a constant tension in the church, which brings that sense of torture closer to the viewer. The shots outside are partly metaphorical images that represent a hidden truth about the place like the cocks being controlled by their owners.

Dramatically, the energy of the film keeps falling. A sense of hopelessness is created through this decline in the narrative arc, until in the last part — when Rivo can't find anyone who is “possessed” — the viewer is left with no hope in the images and time becomes static. That represents the true core of this place. There is no hope for these people, only until they experience violently psychological abuse, left with no hope in the images and

time becomes static. That represents the true core of this place. There is no hope for these people, only until they experience violently psychological abuse, like Pierre did, and then begin to believe that Jesus has freed them from their chains.

### **What do you want to achieve with the footage that is shown repetitively?**

It appears as repetition, but not a single frame is showed to times. This was a deliberate conceptual decision related to trauma and psychological abuse. The people inside the institution are exposed to the same ordeal every day and are constantly told that they are possessed by the devil. Through this relentless repetition, they begin to lose their sense of reality and to doubt their own perception. It's basically a primitive procedure of brainwash.

### **Why is the walk-through with Rivo part of the film? It is stylistically the opposite.**

Rivo is the oldest and most experienced exorcist there, so it was important for me that he be part of the film and show us his perspective. I didn't want to condemn the place purely from my own position.

This walk-through was actually filmed on my first day while I was still researching and trying to understand who, in the eyes of the exorcists, was supposedly possessed by the devil. I thought it was a good opportunity for a test shoot, so I took the camera on my shoulder and asked Rivo to walk with me and show me who was possessed. The walk lasted about an hour.

At the time I didn't understand what was happening, because we just kept walking and he kept speaking to people. That evening I translated the footage with my friend and realized that in reality he didn't find anyone at all. That walk showed exactly what the place really is about. There are no "possessed" people — only people who are mentally ill or handicapped.

That's when I knew the walk-through had to be part of the film. It makes the message even stronger, because the film briefly shifts from a constructed cinematic world into a kind of journalistic documentary, which creates another level of authenticity. That was important to me.

### **How did you meet Pierre?**

I met Pierre while he was working in the garden. His family brought him a few days later after I arrived. He was working chained up in the garden when I saw him the first time. Over time, we started greeting each other, exchanging a few words. Pierre speaks English, because he studied computer science in Paris. He was one of the inmates I was able talking to. He told me his

story why he was there. He kept telling me that he couldn't sleep at night because he was in so much pain. His hands and feet were chained even at night and the pain was so intense he couldn't fall back asleep. I believe that because of this lack of sleep, he eventually lost his mind and that is exactly what the exorcists there want. At some point he didn't recognize me anymore. He looked at me with empty eyes, as if he had never seen me before. One day I saw him in the church, praying, reading the Bible, singing along with everyone else. That's when I realized that some kind of brainwashing was happening in that place.

### **What were the conditions like during filming?**

Filming was extremely exhausting because the atmosphere in that place is deeply disturbing. You constantly hear chains, you constantly see people hopping because they can't walk properly. Many are merely existing. Up to eight people live in a small room, sleeping on the ground. They only receive food once a day.

I also underestimated the impact the whole experience would have on me, because I went there without any real psychological preparation. The most frightening thing was the routine. Every day was exactly the same. The same songs, the same preaching, the same shouting. It had an almost hypnotic, meditative effect, even on me.

At the beginning of my stay Rivo said that Jesus had sent me and that I could film whatever I wanted. Over time, I think some exorcists started to distrust me because I stayed for such a long time, while others were still convinced of my "call" by Jesus. In the end, I was invited by a priest and asked if I would like to become an exorcist. After two months, I was no longer mentally or physically capable of entering the Toby.



## **Contact**

Uranowicz FILM

Münzstr. 6

51063 Köln

Tel: +49 152 33 84 66 83

E-Mail: [mail@uranowicz.com](mailto:mail@uranowicz.com)

[www.uranowicz.com](http://www.uranowicz.com)

