

Editorial: Religion and Migration in Africa and the African Diaspora

Federico Settler

Mari Haugaa Engh

Reflections on migration and religion at a time when migration remains a controversial political issue, whether it concerns disagreements in the US senate over financing President Trump's proposed wall at the US-Mexico border, the continuing influx of refugees from Africa and the Middle East into Europe, or xenophobia towards African migrants in South Africa and the Romying in Myanmar. Consequently, continuously changing trajectories, networks and caravans of migration are produced, as a result of peoples differing needs and desires for movement and settlement.

Those who have worked in the field of migration know that the migration of people has been a sustained phenomenon that has shaped the making of societies, it has fractured hegemonies and ultimately produced diverse diasporas. This was evident in the works Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy and Jamaica Kincaid as they have reflected on the fortunes and hardships of the windrush generation in the United Kingdom. Similarly, their predecessors Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Aimé Césaire, and Sol Plaatje wrote widely about the social condition of being black in the world through narratives of migration, where they variously came to confront themselves of the objects of terror, curiosity and the exotic – all tropes that operate to deny black subjectivity. Thus we take as a starting point that transnational migration has significantly shaped the political and intellectual labour has of people of colour.

During the past two decades Africa has experienced significant movement of people from and around the global South, and South Africa has seen a large increase in the number of people migrating to and through the country, to the point where it has become Africa largest container of migrants from across the continent. However, as the field of transnational and migration studies has grown, research about Africa has remained under-represented, and

often Africa is depicted as the place from where people flee from in pursuit of liberty and modernity in the 'North'- away from patriarchies, poverty and superstition in the global South. Locating this volume within the tradition of transnationalism, we start with the recognition that scholars of migration have developed increasing interest in the ways that migrants "sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement" (Basch, Glick- Schiller & Blanc-Szanton 1994:6). As a particular field within migration studies, transnationalism denotes a series of networks, activities, relationships and interactions of exchange and belonging that transcend national borders (Vertovec 1999). Recently, scholars such as Asamoah-Gyadu (2015), Huwelmeier and Krause (2010), and Adogame (2014) have argued that these transnational relations are further strengthened by religious affiliations. What this suggests is that migration is not just about networks of movement, or about flows of persons *en route* to an imagined ideal destination, but it is also about deliberately maintaining connections to homelands while simultaneously becoming embedded in new places of residence (Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004).

Unlike earlier migration or diaspora studies, where the interest in religion focused on its instrumentalist function in helping migrants navigate and overcome the challenges of dislocation and settlement (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003), in this volume, we are interested in the active deliberations and negotiations of religion in the context of continuous migration (Settler 2018). We sought to examine how African migrants in Africa and the African diaspora imagine, understand, and activate religion and religious practices in their migratory lives. In so doing, the volume examines not only the role of religion in meaning-making and coping strategies, but also the role of religion in the production and maintenance of transnational networks of relationships.

Recent years have seen increased interest in not just Christian theological responses to migration (Cruz 2010; Rivera 2012), but also in traditions that do not fall into the western protestant Christian tradition. While many of these studies have focused on variations of Christian Pentecostalism in migrant communities (Adogame 2013), others have focussed on the reception of the Muslims or religious others in European and north American contexts (Kaemingk 2018; Mavelli & Wlison 2016). By and large, these studies tend to focus on what migrants do (to survive) and how faith communities respond, or should respond (to help migrants survive). Building on this, this volume is an attempt to look beyond these narratives of trauma,

survival, and resilience – to interrogate the agentic, moral, social, and religious economies of exchange between migrants, as well between migrants and host communities. So as to widen our understanding of migrant social worlds, and to develop new methodologies for the study of religion and migration, in particular methodologies that are able to capture the nuance and complexity of African migrations.

To this end we invited scholars of religion and migration from across the world to a three-day conference in Durban, South Africa, in January 2016. The conference drew scholars from Ethiopia, Botswana, England, Turkey, Germany, Zimbabwe, Norway and South Africa. Apart from a vibrant exchange of ideas and experiences, the conference focussed on the everyday lived experiences of migrants in a wide range of contexts. Conscious not to be subsumed in narratives of trauma and vulnerability, the conference delegates worked hard to excavate and demonstrate the agentic in the everyday lives and beliefs of migrants. In producing this volume, we sent out a call for additional contributions and received promising papers from the US, Spain, Portugal and Ghana. The final draft volume contained 10 articles but unfortunately, we three contributors withdrew at a very late stage. These three were focused on architectures of belonging among African migrants in Barcelona, Ghanaian migrants' mobility in Africa, and Cape Verdean missionary narratives in Europe, and would have made fruitful contributions to this volume. Nevertheless, we are proud of the final volume – which we elaborate below – as more than half of the contributions are from emerging scholars who, despite not being primarily located in the field of religion and theology, found that in their research religion emerged as a critical factor in how migrants make meaning, sustain connections and reconfigure their social and legal standing in their places of settlement. Sixty percent of the contributors are women – all but one, being women of colour. In this regard we are proud that this volume not only provided spaces for critical and innovative scholars, but also that the character and feel of the volume is significantly shaped by the gendered, racial and migrant locations of the contributors.

In this volume we explore the religious lives of migrants in Southern Africa, and beyond, with special attention to how various religious traditions shape, and are shaped by, migration. With a deliberate decentering of protestant Christianity, we include in this volume migrants' religious narratives within Islam, African indigenous religions, Santeria and African Pentecostals. We also try to move beyond the idea that when people move, they take

their religion with them, as this approach perpetuates an idea of religion as traditions that are neatly packaged and can be translated and transferred neatly into new contexts. Instead, our work is aligned to Huwelmeier and Krause's approach in *Traveling Spirits*, a text that highlights the complex strategies and practices that religious migrants use to stay connected to sacred places, traditions and ritual practices – including the carrying talismans to transfer island spirits across to the seas, and performing rituals of invocation and possession that invites ancestral spirits to manifest in new places of settlement. In this way, migrants make use of, and form religious communities as networks of support, trust and knowledge, not only to make meaning transcendentally but also to accumulate material knowledge of regulations, languages, expectations, desirable jobs, and desired settlement.

This volume was compiled to illustrate how migrants deploy religion, and to explore the many ways that African and African diasporic religious practices, networks and affinities come under strain and/ or are reconfigured as a result of migration. While some contributors, such as Boaz, explore how the reconstitution of religious practices and authorities emerge as efforts by migrants to align themselves with the values of the host society, others such as Sigamoney and Nyamnjoh discuss the activation of religious resources by migrants in their efforts to foster resilience and reinforce identities in hostile contexts. Elsewhere in the volume, ethnographic reflections illustrate how migrants' agency is especially visible in religious and cultural practices. What ultimately brings these articles together is their recognition that nuanced (feminist, race critical and postcolonial), new epistemologies and methodological practices are necessary for understanding migrants' lifeworlds. This volume is an attempt to speak to these challenges and emerging practices.

These efforts are borne out of a recognition that in writing about religion and migration related to Africa and the African diaspora, we must privilege race, agency and reflexivity. We start with the recognition that much of the scholarship on migration mutes race, despite the fact that much of the field concerns itself with the movement, regulation and victimisation of the people of colour. Likewise, we recognise that brown people, and brown women especially, labour under particular representations that couple black people's migration with criminality (Mahalingam & Rabelo 2013), undocumented movement, and relations of exploitation.

Similarly, while we recognise that much of migration studies rests of the idea of the migrant as victim or villain, deserving either of surveillance or

saving (Collins 2007; Goodey 2009), in this volume we take agency as a critical theme in examining and analysing migrant social worlds. It is our view that the preoccupation with scripting migrants as victims or villains (Naqvi 2007) leads to the neglect in terms of migrants' agency in terms of their own mobility as well as in narratives of resilience and survival. We contend that the privileging of migrants' agency presents a counter narrative to the diminishing weight of the victim trope – which presumes migrants as stateless, without identity, sexless and apolitical.

Finally, in this volume we selected articles that not only privilege the experience of African or African diasporic migrants, but also those that reduce the methodological dissonance and distance between the authors and people we study. Since several of the authors in this volume are themselves 'people out of place', we sought to produce a volume that not only reflects migrants lived experiences, but also to present texts that reduce the distance of the researcher from the field. In particular, as we privilege migrants' agency, we write about our own communities and not of nameless, faceless people solely in need of assistance from development agencies and faith-based organizations. In this regard, we sought to not only highlight agency but also show the *vulnerability* of the researchers.

In the opening article **Danielle Boaz** draws on case law to demonstrate how the reception and criminalization of Jamaican sanetria practices in America, and Canada shaped the religious self-representation among migrants. She notes that "in their attempts to salvage their community's image, these immigrants provided the courts with the rhetoric and, one could argue, the permission, to refuse to provide legal protection to African diaspora religions" (p. 12). In this regard Boaz, through her opening article illustrate the complex negotiations migrants undertake with respect to religion, identity, and mobility.

Across the Atlantic, **Henrietta Nyamnjoh** examines the how Cameroonian migrants' desire for healing reveals interesting meanings and values placed on everyday sacred objects. In her study of Cameroonian migrants in Cape Town, South Africa she notes that "the challenges of migration and the various forms of exclusion in society have not only resulted in migrants turning to religion for refuge, but has equally led to the increased use of sacred objects whose anointing powers are perceived to break the 'yoke' of people and allow them to push back against their precarity" (p. 51). Thus Nyamnjoh, as Jennifer Sigamoney elsewhere in the volume, shows how

migrants use religious artefacts, languages, and practices as interpretive and explanatory resources related to harnessing resilience.

In the next article, **Mari Haugaa Engh** discusses and interrogates the meaning of religion and pietistic practices, among highly skilled, African sports labour migrants in Scandinavia. This ethnography offers vignettes of African pro-footballers' utilisation of prayer in planning future migration, increasing visibility and integration into Nordic society, while maintaining connections to their communities of faith in Nigeria. Engh's notion of transcendental locality offers a promising new way to imagine both professional, gender, and religious networks of belonging. She concludes that "religious faith and practice function as a means for articulating and assigning meaning to experiences of lifestyle sacrifice, emotional and physical pain, as well as personal success and prosperity" (p. 75)

Jennifer Sigamoney and **Buhle Mpfu**, respectively, examine migrant religious lives in the city of Johannesburg, South Africa. Sigamoney, in her examination of Somali Muslim narratives of precarity and vulnerability, highlights the strategies of resilience that emerged on individual and collective levels. Her article shows how strategies of resilience developed by migrants not only reduced risk or harm for the community, but also produced residential patterns, religious affinities and alliances, as well as changing gender roles as a result of local deliberation and negotiation among migrants. Sigamoney asserts that "religion and spirituality play an essential role in motivating them to persist in building livelihoods in the face of problems associated with xenophobia" (p. 82).

Mpfu, in his interrogation of Christian church responses to xenophobia and migrant vulnerabilities, deploys the schema of church as hostile, host, and home to demonstrate the inherent ambivalence in theological discourses of migration. His article challenges not only regimes of hospitality and reception of the migrant other, but the need for the church to reform its own theological and missiological hermeneutics of care. He writes that "such transformation will require appreciating the agency and contributions of migrants in the development of South African communities as well as deeper examination of how these encounters can enrich theological, ecclesial and missional reflections" (p. 116).

The closing two articles explore some of the **Delipher Manda** and **Federico Settler** offer a narrative account of how migration and gender research require new and more enabling methodologies. In the article they open

a discussion about the inherent biases in ethical governance processes with respect to race, gender and migration. They note that “reflexivity of ethics and power inherent in review processes might not only facilitate the development and recognition of innovative research methods, but also reduce the alienating assumptions about black women researchers, as well as the migrant communities we research” (p. 136).

In the closing article, **Trygve Wyller** reflects on how a theological commitment to centering the lived experience of migrants in Christian social practice, produced surprising new epistemological and methodological outcomes for the researcher. Through examining a range of fieldwork interactions – trading, eating and walking – with Congolese religious migrants in South Africa, Wyller reflects critically on how Christian ecclesiology becomes reformed. He advocates for the idea of a decentred ecclesiology, where everyday migrant experiences and religious practices serve as counter-conduct to paternalistic theological and developmental practices.

It is our view that collectively, these articles reveal some of the empirical realities of being migrants of colour, as well as insights into the social and personal religious experiences of African or African diasporic migrants. We see this volume as a small contribution to the field and that we hope will stimulate further deliberations with respect to religion and migration research in Africa and the African diaspora.

Finally, we acknowledge the generous sponsorship and support of the National Research Foundation’s *Thuthuka* funding instrument for the support of the research project: Religion and Migration in Postcolonial Africa led by Dr Federico Settler. This volume was made possible by the deliberation between Dr Settler, and the project research associates: Dr Mari Haugaa Engh, Prof Roderick Hewitt and Prof Trygve Wyller.

Acknowledgement

As the editors of this volume we would like to extend our appreciation to the National Research Foundation (Thuthuka) for funding the research project that made this volume possible.

References

- Adogame, A. 2014. *The Public Face of African New Religious Movements in Diaspora*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
<https://www.amazon.com/Public-African-Religious-Movements-Diaspora/dp/1472420101>
- Adogame, A. 2013. *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury.
<https://www.amazon.com/African-Christian-Diaspora-Currents-Christianity/dp/1441136673>
- Asamoah-Gyadu, K. 2015. Migration, Diaspora Mission, and Religious Others in World Christianity: An African Perspective. *International Bulletin for Mission Research* 39,4:189 - 192.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/239693931503900406>
- Basch, L., N. Glick-Schiller & C. Szanton-Blanc 1994. *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments and Deterritorialized Nation-States*. New York: Routledge.
<https://www.amazon.com/Nations-Unbound-Transnational-Deterritorialized-Nation-States/dp/2881246303>
- Collins, J. 2007. Immigrants as Victims of Crime and Criminal Justice Discourse in Australia. *International Review of Victimology* 14,1:55 - 79.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/026975800701400104>
- Cruz, GT. 2010. *An Intercultural Theology of Migration*. Leiden & Boston: Brill.
<https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004181229.i-360>
- Goodey, J. 2009. Immigrants as Crime Victims in the European Union: With Special Attention to Hate Crime. In W.A. McDonald (eds.): *Immigration, Crime and Justice*. Bingley: Emerald Group Publishing Limited.
[https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-6136\(2009\)0000013012](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1521-6136(2009)0000013012)
- Hagan, J. & H.R. Ebaugh 2003. Calling Upon the Sacred: Migrants' Use of Religion in the Migration Process. *International Migration Review* 37,4: 1145 - 1162.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2003.tb00173.x>
- Huwelmeier, G. & K. Krause (eds.). 2010. *Traveling Spirits: Migrants, Markets, Mobilities*. New York & London: Routledge.
<https://www.amazon.com/Traveling-Spirits-Mobilities-Routledge-Anthropology/dp/0415808006>
- Kaemingk, M. 2018. *Christian Hospitality and Muslim Immigration in an Age*

- of Fear*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
<https://www.amazon.com/Christian-Hospitality-Muslim-Immigration-Fear/dp/0802874584>
- Levitt, P. & N. Glick Schiller 2004. Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society. *International Migration Review* 38,3:1002 - 1039.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-7379.2004.tb00227.x>
- Mahalingam, R. & V.C. Rabelo 2013. Theoretical, Methodological, and Ethical Challenges to the Study of Immigrants: Perils and Possibilities. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 141: 25 - 41.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/cad.20041>
- Mavelli, L. & E. Wilson. 2016. *The Refugee Crisis and Religion Secularism, Security and Hospitality in Question*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
<https://www.amazon.com/Refugee-Crisis-Religion-Perspectives-International/dp/1783488956>
- Naqvi, F. 2007. *The Literary and Cultural Rhetoric of Victimhood: Western Europe, 1970 - 2005*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230603479>
- Rivera-Pagán, L. 2013. Xenophilia or Xenophobia: Towards a Theology of Migration. In Padilla, E. & P. Phan (eds.): *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
<https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137031495.0004>
https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137031495_3
- Settler, F.G. 2018. A Postcolonial Perspective of Religion and Migration. In Machado, D., B. Turner & T. Wyller (eds.): *Borderland Religion: Ambiguous Practices of Difference, Hope and Beyond*. Abingdon: Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351056946-8>
- Vertovec, S. 1999. Conceiving and Researching Transnationalism. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 22,2:447 - 462.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/014198799329558>

Federico Settler
Sociology of Religion
School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics
University of KwaZulu-Natal
settler@ukzn.ac.za

Federico Settler & Mari Haugaa Engh

Mari Haugaa Engh
Postdoctoral Fellow
College of Humanities
University of KwaZulu-Natal
mari.ENGH@gmail.com