# ‘Because I know God answers prayers’: The Role of Religion in African - Scandinavian Labour Migration

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## Abstract

Drawing on interviews conducted with highly skilled Nigerian women footballers that have migrated to work in Scandinavian clubs, this article provides an analysis of how religious beliefs and practices function as resources for articulating, producing, and maintaining transnational mobility. Through taking part in transnational Pentecostal communities, Nigerian women migrants access networks and forms of knowledge that supports their status and mobility as labour migrants. Moreover, these women believe that their transnational and daily religious practices, such as prayer, are ways through which a transnationally mobile career can be achieved and sustained. Drawing on material from ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with migrant Nigerian women football players, I argue that religion provides these labour migrants with access to material, inter-personal and transcendental resources for achieving their career and migratory aspirations.

**Keywords:** Religion, Pentecostal Christianity, Transnationalism, Labour Migration.

## Introduction

Scholars of international migration have, over the last three decades, utilised the concept of transnationalism to demonstrate how migrants maintain connections to their homelands while simultaneously becoming embedded in their new places of residence (Glick-Schiller 2003; Itzigsohn 2000; Levitt &


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Glick-Schiller 2004). As opposed to neo-classical theories, a transnational approach to international migration entails exploration of the processes, activities, and connections that are rooted in yet stretch across the borders of one or more nation-states. Although maintaining transnational activities and connections is not new among migrants, scholars have increasingly started paying attention to 'the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement' (Basch, Glick-Schiller & Szanton-Blanc 1994:6). In so doing, scholarship on international migration has moved beyond analyses of assimilation and integration into 'host' countries and communities, focussing instead on cross-border activities, connections, livelihoods and belongings.

For many migrants, religious practice forms an important part of the transnational activities they take part in on a daily basis (Levitt 2007). When people move across borders and settle for longer or shorter periods of time, they take their religions with them (Spickard & Adogame 2010). Religious activities such as 'singing, offering, playing music, and dancing can be performed anywhere … [and] followers can fit most of the paraphernalia for their rituals in a suitcase' (Huwelmeier & Krause 2010:3). Moreover, migrants use religion, for example, to stay connected to the places they leave behind, and to forge forms of transnational belonging (Carnes & Yang 2004; Ebaugh & Chafetz 2002; Guest 2003; Levitt 2007; Levitt, Lucken & Barnett 2011; Menjívar 2003). In recognition of the role that religion plays, Nina Glick-Schiller has argued that religion offers particular opportunities for simultaneous embeddedness as it provides 'migrants with a simultaneously local and transnational mode of incorporation that may configure them not as ethnics but as citizens of both their locality of settlement and of the world' (2009:126). Participating in religious communities can thus give migrants access to social capital and spiritual resources relevant to settling in a new context. At the same time, however, inclusion into religious communities can also offer opportunities for transnational 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004) that are not restricted by national or ethnic borders. In this sense, many religious communities are in themselves transnational communities.

In this article, I aim to contribute further to analyses of the role and meaning of religion in migratory processes, by emphasising how religious activities and communities enable skilled labour migrants to embed themselves into their communities materially as well as transcendentally. Illustrating how

religious practice and belief is part and parcel of the migratory journeys and narratives of a particular group of Pentecostal Christian Nigerian women migrants, I examine how migrants draw on religious beliefs, practices, and communities to forge and sustain migratory lives. In particular, I suggest that transnational religious communities and activities offer not merely material resources in the shape of interpersonal support networks and knowledge for migrants, but also offer migrants tools with which to articulate and achieve their migratory and career aspirations. In this, migrants understand daily religious activities, such as prayer, as practices that contribute to the production and maintenance of transnational migration. Labour migrants make use of religious discourse to articulate (and mute) their own agency in producing and maintaining transnational migration.

This article is built on material from interviews conducted with a group of Pentecostal Christian Nigerian women labour migrants who have migrated to work as professionals in various football clubs in the Scandinavian countries (Norway, Sweden, Denmark). At the outset, the interviews and the ethnographic fieldwork of which they formed part, were not concerned with questions of religion and faith. My attention to the role of religious beliefs, practices and communities emerged as a result of the significant meaning and value the participants' ascribed to them. As such, the material I present in this article emerged from migrants' own narratives and articulations of transnational migration rather than from the focus of my research inquiry.

## The Role of Religion in Transnational Migration

Studies of religion and migration have tended to focus on notions of diaspora, and have primarily engaged with three key dimensions: awareness of religious identity, the role of communal organisations, and the maintenance of ties to a 'homeland' (Vertovec 2009; Cesari 2013). This research has illustrated how most religious movements are themselves global societal systems (Beyer 2001) that engender transnational identities and activities (Levitt 2003). Contemporary migrants increase and deepen the transnational nature and connection of religious movements 'by transnationalizing everyday religious practice' (Levitt 2004:2). Through the process of transnational migration, migrants contribute to reconfiguring religious activities and traditions in both sending and receiving contexts. The religious ideas, practices, identities and capital migrants bring with them are reconfigured and/or reasserted in their

new places of residence, and subsequently 'remitted' back to sending communities and contexts (Levitt 1999).

In the same way that religious commitments have inspired mission-oriented migrations, migrants themselves contribute to increasing the global and transnational reach of different religious institutions and movements. Religious movements can function as supposed 'global communities' in which individuals from a range of different contexts take part in 'increasingly homogenized forms of worship and organization' (Levitt 2003:848). The existence of 'global religions' presents opportunities for migrants to continue to practice and participate in familiar religious communities despite having crossed borders and settled into new geographic, socio-economic, and political contexts. Hence, religious communities and movements are key avenues through which transnational identities and belongings can be accessed, constructed and maintained (Levitt 2003; Bowen 2004). They 'embed migrants and non-migrants in transnational organizational networks that contain resources, power, and skills which are relevant to both home and host-country concerns' (Levitt 2002:15). By emphasising these potentials, scholars of transnational migration have been influential in moving debates concerning the role of religion in migratory processes beyond discussions of integration and assimilation, focussing instead on how religious communities and activities enable transnational 'ways of being' and 'ways of belonging' (Levitt & Glick-Schiller 2004).

Nevertheless, Obadare and Adebanwi (2010) argue that the focus in studies of migration and religion has been rather one-sided. They claim that the scholarship has focused on certain core topics primarily related to immigrant adaptation, identity-making, transnational religious institutions, and social movements (Obadare & Adebanwi 2010:31). Hagan and Ebaugh (2003) express a similar sentiment, and argue that as a result of the focus on institutional factors and dynamics, insufficient attention has been paid to the role of religion in different stages of the migration process. Due also to the traditional reliance on neo-classical theories and economic conditions in analyses of international migration, scholarship has been more concerned with the causes and consequences of migration than with the ways in which migratory decisions are made, and how transnational movement is produced and maintained (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003).

Consequently, Hagan and Ebaugh argue that research must start exploring in more detail 'the spiritual resources [religion] provides for some

immigrant populations in the decision to migrate and the psychological effects of this on migrants' commitment to endure the hardship of the migration' (Hagan & Ebaugh 2003:1146). By participating in religious communities, rituals, and activities from their original places of residence, transnational migrants are able to maintain meaningful connections to the places and communities they have left behind (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007; Menjivar 2003). Catharina Williams (2008), for example, has explored how Indonesian migrant domestic workers used religion as a spiritual resource in coping with daily challenges. Asamoah-Gyadu (2010), in his work on diasporic African Christianities, argues that even before physical movement takes place, migrants draw on their religious beliefs and use prayer as a practice through which residence or work permits can be obtained. He states that 'in the religious life of African immigrants, prayers for nkrataa, "papers" (that is, proper resident documents), rank next only to healing in requests made at prayer services' (Asamoah-Gyadu 2010:90). The important role of religious rituals in preparing for and engendering transnational migration is illustrated also in Van Dijk's (1997) work on Ghanian Pentecostal migrants, and Hagan and Ebaugh's (2003) study of Mayan migrants from Guatemala to Houston, Texas. In all three studies, religious leaders and rituals are seen to play a significant role in deciding whether to migrate or not, in ensuring 'safe passage,' and in the acquisition of legal status as a migrant.

Hence, for many migrants religion holds a key role at all stages in the migratory process, and 'symbolisms suffuse every aspect of the transnational migration process' (Obadare & Adebanwi 2010:31). Levitt, therefore, argues that studies of transnational migration and religion provide 'an empirical window onto one way in which religious globalization actually gets done' (2003:849). In a similar vein, in this article I suggest that analyses of migrants' religious practices and beliefs can offer meaningful insights into how transnational migration 'gets done': how it is prepared, produced, maintained, and made sense of by migrants themselves.

By presenting material from a case study of Nigerian Pentecostal women labour migrants, I aim to contribute to understandings of the role that religion plays in migratory processes. I am particularly interested in exploring how migrant women who travel alone for the purpose of work, make use of religious communities and activities to engender and make sense of their own journeys. In other words, I am curious about 'everyday religion' (Ammerman 2006) and the ways in which individuals use, articulate, and understand

religion in their daily lives as migrants. Although research on religion and migration tends to focus on formalised practices and institutions, religion is 'as much, if not more, about individualized, interior, informal practices and beliefs' (Levitt 2003:869). It is precisely the articulation of these personal and informal aspects of religious belief and practice that I focus on here.

## Theoretical Framework

Transnational approaches to migration centre on the experiences and activities of migrants themselves, and force attention onto the role and form of migrant agency in migratory processes. Of particular interest in this article, is the role that migrants play in producing and sustaining migration: how they dream, imagine, plan, and work at making transnational movement happen. Pessar and Mahler (2003:817) assert that 'much of what people actually do transnationally is foregrounded by imagining, planning and strategizing'. As such, fears, hopes, aspirations and desires are constituent parts of migrants' agency, alongside such things as habit, judgement and action (Pessar & Mahler 2003). For football players and other athletes, migration is a desirable part of career trajectories; by moving to another country to ply their trade they are able to position themselves as international professionals. Maintaining this status and position as international professionals, however, requires constant work and investment. The ways in which labour migrants such as footballers achieve transnational migration is intimately tied to how they imagine and plan (future) physical movements, and how they establish connections and acquire knowledge about particular places and employers.

In their work on African women football migrants, Engh and Agergaard (2013) have argued that 'it is through developing knowledge about, and becoming embedded within, different locales around the world that sports migrants are able to produce and maintain labour migration' (2013:3). Thus, I posit that athletic mobility is achieved through 'locality'; through 'being rooted or anchored – socially, economically or politically – in the country of immigration and/or in the sending country; it means developing/having a set of social relations at specific places' (Dahinden 2010:327). Often the development of social relations in a specific locality occurs in diverse places simultaneously, depending on whether the migrant in question is planning to stay where she currently resides, or whether she hopes to arrive elsewhere. Gaining locality in a place she has not yet arrived can enable to her to arrive

there in the future. Locality, or embeddedness, is accrued as migrants create connections with people and institutions (such as sports agents, managers, former migrant players or professional football clubs) and accumulate knowledge that can support and improve their work performances. This involves gaining knowledge about prospective employers, their expectations, labour legislation, migrant networks etc.

In this article I add to this conceptualisation of locality by arguing that migrants 'localise' both through interpersonal networks and the acquisition of knowledge, as well as through their belief in and commitment to a transcendental power. From the perspective of migrants, belief in a transcendental power and religious practices are considered as important as material and interpersonal forms of locality. Prayer, for example, is seen as a practice that itself can promote and produce transnational career mobility. Because of the belief that prayers 'work' – 'that speech acts, through the spiritual realm, foster material transformation of a believer's situation' (Maier 2012:67) – prayer plays both material and transcendental roles. On the one hand prayers are part of a continued commitment to their faith and to God through cultivating pietistic dispositions, while on the other hand they are believed capable of changing material circumstances. This paper makes a distinction between transcendental and material forms of locality, although the two, in practice and experience, are inseparable. I do this in order to illustrate that for many (religious) migrants, processes of locality are related as much to the transcendental, as to material and interpersonal relations and knowledge. Moreover, in this article I emphasise the 'mindwork' components of agency and find that religion provides a way of framing and articulating migrants' agency and aspirations. Through prayer migrants not only work at engendering migration, they also articulate the dreams, hopes, and plans they have for the future. In this sense, prayer as daily religious practices are an expression of 'mindwork' agency insofar as it denotes 'the outward behaviour of the body constitutes both the potentiality, as well as the means through which an interiority is realised' (Mahmood 2001:214), and thus provides insights into aspects of migrant agency that are not easily accessible.

## Research Methods and Empirical Material

The material presented in this article is drawn from interviews and observations conducted as part of a larger research project on Nigerian

women's football migration into, and within, Nordic women's football clubs. In the project, ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews were conducted at numerous sites in Nigeria, Norway, Sweden, and Denmark over the course of 12 months. During the fieldwork I lived with the participants, and conducted 2-3 in-depth interviews with each. In total I conducted interviews with 14 current and former Nigerian women football migrants to Scandinavia, as well as with 16 club officials and coaches in Scandinavia.

The project employed a transnational optic to explore migrants' experiences and narratives of migration. In this, I paid particular attention to the ways in which migrations happen; how they are planned, produced, and maintained. Mobile athletes, such as the women footballers introduced in this article, are a type of highly-skilled labour migrants who make significant investments in creating and sustaining international professional careers. In sports labour migration, contracts and careers are often short and the supply of prospective and un-contracted workers remains a constant surplus (Bourg & Gouguet 2010). In this sense, the transnational migration of athletes is akin to that of other highly-skilled labour migrants and cultural workers. These are migrants who do not move with the primary aim of 'settling-down' (although some eventually do), but who work at obtaining transnational migration as a way in which to develop their professional careers. As such, the case study of Nigerian women's football migration presented here offers insights into the dynamics and experiences of highly-skilled labour migration more generally.

At the outset of the project from which the material I present here is drawn, questions concerning religious beliefs and practices were not included. Only about halfway through the fieldwork and interview period did I fully realise that, for most of the participants, religious beliefs and practices were key avenues through which migration was imagined, articulated and believed to have been achieved. While the participants mentioned that hard work and focussed training were important factors in their recruitment into teams outside of Nigeria, they also emphasised 'God's will' or 'God's gifts' as an explanatory framework for their success in achieving international employment. As a result, I began to pay more serious attention to the role of religious communities, beliefs and practices, and proceeded to integrate religion into my analyses of how the migratory movements of women footballers were produced and maintained.

In the first phase of analysis, all statements related to faith and religious practice were isolated and separated into different categories. These included

migrants' stories about their journeys into Scandinavia, their dreams and plans for the future, as well as explanations of their personal success as international professional footballers. In the second phase of analysis, emphasis was placed on exploring those instances in which religious faith and practice appeared to be directly related to the production and maintenance of transnational athletic mobility. The analysis I present below is not exhaustive, but offers insights into how religion features significantly in migrants' narratives about the processes through with their transnational mobility is produced and maintained. Further, based on an inductive approach, the analysis explores everyday activities and factors that the migrants themselves understood as being important.

## Analysis and Discussion

The participants in the study all come from the southern and southeastern states of Nigeria, regions within which Christianity is the dominant religion. Although Nigerian women play football also in the Northern, and predominantly Muslim, regions of the country, most professional and migrant players are those who come from the south, and urban regions around major cities such as Lagos and Port Harcourt. The interviewees were clear that their Christian beliefs formed a key part of their identity and daily activities. Two of the participants identified themselves as Catholic Christians, whereas four stated that they participated in a variety of churches that fall under the purview of Pentecostal Christianity. While two of the participants did not explicitly self-identify as Pentecostals, I observe together with other scholars that 'Pentecost occurs outside of Pentecostalism' (Omenyo 2002), and that the discursive patterns which emerge from these participants indicate their 'Pentecost-alisation', even if they do not have membership in a Pentecostal church (Hollenweger 1996; Nadar & Leonard 2006).

Albeit in different ways, the participants all participated in some form of transnational religious community. Chiamaka and Nneka[1], for example, use Facebook to follow and engage with international Pentecostal churches such as 'The Potters House Church', and 'The Redeemed Christian Church of God'. Both regularly post, 'share' and respond to prayers, stories, photos and videos shared by these churches online. Chiamaka very occasionally visits a Protestant Scandinavian church, while Nneka participates semi-regularly in a

[1]All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Pentecostal church led by a Ghanaian priest in the Scandinavian city she resided in at the time of the interview.

A third informant, and one that will be given voice in this article due to her illustrative way of practicing her religion, is Onyeka who had been an active member of a church in the city where she lived and played football before leaving Nigeria. A few months after arriving in Scandinavia, the partner of a fellow migrant footballer told her about a Pentecostal Nigerian-based church that streamed services live on their website. Because Onyeka's team often played matches on Sundays she had, until then, not been able to attend church services in Scandinavia, nor did she feel as though a Scandinavian church would offer the same teachings and doctrines that she was used to from her church in Nigeria. Once she learned of the live streams from the Pentecostal church based in Lagos, she started taking an active part in this transnational, online community. Unless her team was playing a game on a Sunday, Onyeka 'worshipped online' by watching the live stream, and she actively participated in the services through prayer, singing, and anointing herself with oils and water. When in Nigeria, she visited this particular church and purchased blessed oils and communion bread that she took with her back to Scandinavia to make use of during Sunday services.

The way in which Onyeka practices her faith is particularly illustrative of how religion 'travels' with migrants, and of the transnational ways in which migrants practice their religion. Not only does Onyeka participate, transnationally, in church services conducted in a different locale, she also brings with her religious artefacts that enable this active participation. For Onyeka, participating in this particular church is a way in which she can assert belonging to a transnational and virtual community of believers, but also remain connected to a particular church community in Nigeria. As her circumstances have changed since arriving in Scandinavia, Onyeka also finds comfort in practicing her belief in familiar ways. Onyeka's religious practice and participation in transnational religious communities illustrates both material and transcendental locality; she travels with religious artefacts and commodities, and belongs to a community of believers that worships together online.

## *Material Locality: Religious Networks of Support and Trust*

Sports migrant's athletic careers are highly contingent and uncertain not only because of the nature of the profession itself (Roderick 2006), but also because

of the constant need to adjust to new contexts, institutional 'cultures' and legal frameworks. For recently arrived migrants, acquiring knowledge about their legal entitlements and obligations is particularly challenging. One of the women I interviewed – Chiamaka – turned to the pastor in a Scandinavian Lutheran church for advice when she suspected that her club was paying her less than she was, by law, entitled to. The pastor confirmed her suspicions, subsequent to which she decided to not renew her contract with this particular club.

> [*The pastor] said … I should tell them [the club] that this is what I want ... the man let me know what I'm supposed to get. That is my right here in [Scandinavia][2] as a non-EU [citizen] … but when I started talking with them about that they said no, they didn't know that I knew what was happening… and that was when I left* (Chiamaka).

Outside of training sessions and matches with her team, Chiamaka had not participated in many social activities other than attending church since arriving at this particular club. This meant that the church and pastor had become reference points for assistance with issues particular to Scandinavia. For Chiamaka, her religious community functioned as a key site in which she could access information about her new place of residence. Her church and the pastor provided her with elements of local knowledge – locality – that she was able to draw on to negotiate with her club and shape her own career.

Religious communities, in addition to providing practical support and advice, also function as networks and sites of trust. Uzoma, for example, argued that her pastor is the preferred person from which to ask for advice. Because of their shared faith, she felt that her pastor is able to provide her with support that is in line with her own religious convictions and morals. In this way, Uzoma is certain that the advice and locality she gains access to through her pastor, is aligned to her own desires and commitments in life. Moreover, because of the pastor's role as a religious authority and spiritual advisor, Uzoma believes he is unlikely to take advantage of or deceive her. As a man

[2] All references to particular Scandinavian countries have been removed and replaced with [Scandinavia]. This has been done in order to protect the anonymity of the participants as well as the football clubs involved in the research project

of faith, she considers him reliable. Several of the other participants expressed similar views, and argued that they prefer to work with and rely on other born-again Christians. Onyeka, for example, chose her current agent precisely because he is a born-again Christian:

> *If you are someone who fear God you will … treat everyone with humanity… I was a little bit sceptical because I [didn't] want an agent but when I look[ed] at him he's a born again Christian, he fears God* (Onyeka).

Religious communities and networks, then, are not only made use of as platforms for increasing locality – knowledge about and understanding of new contexts – but also as sites of trust. Due to shared religious convictions, fellow believers are attractive as advisors when faced with uncertainty and unfamiliar settings. In this sense, religious communities function as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991) through which migrants can access support and a sense of shared values with others. As many of the participants had previously experienced unreliable and fraudulent agents and managers, insisting on working intermediaries who were born-again Christians was seen as an effective strategy for avoiding exploitation and disappointment. Nevertheless, choosing to work with religiously aligned coaches, managers or agents is no guarantee against abuse or exploitation, particularly not for women.

## *Transcendental Locality: Prayer 'works'*

For the participants in this study, prayer was considered a fundamental activity in achieving career mobility and success. Several of the participants stated that they had previously prayed to become selected for a national team or be 'discovered' by an international coach, scout, or agent. One of the participants, Onyeka, said that throughout her career as a professional player, prayer has been an important daily activity:

> *I pray to God, God please I want to play professionally, please, I want to play in the national team* (Onyeka).

For Onyeka, prayer was one of the ways in which she worked towards achieving her goals of a professional and international career. Nneka, similarly,

stated that she prays several times every day; after waking up, before meals, before training sessions or matches, and before she goes to sleep at night. Ebele was also very clear about the role prayer and faith has played in her gaining employment outside of Nigeria:

> *It was just training and prayer – in order to find a way to come to [Scandinavia]. I am just training and focussing and praying. Because I know God answers prayers* (Ebele).

Fundamental in these assertions is the belief that prayers 'work', that they have real effects on the lives of those who pray. The belief that all things are possible through prayer, and that God does answer prayers, is key in Pentecostal Christianities' understanding of the 'faith gospel', as much as prayer is devotional practice is key in Catholic theology (Sheldrake 2012). According to the Pentecostal tradition 'a believer has a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ and he or she can obtain these blessings merely by a positive confession of faith' (Gifford 2001:62). Thus, by communicating their careers aspirations through prayer believers can actualise their dreams and goals. Both Onyeka and Nneka claimed that it was by praying, and training, that they were able to achieve their dreams of playing professional football outside Nigeria.

Like activities centred on material forms of locality – establishing social relationships, learning languages and acquiring knowledge about a particular context – prayers 'work' to promote and support migratory aspirations. Through praying, these Pentecostal believers give 'positive confessions of faith'; they 'name and claim' particular desired changes in their material circumstances. Hence, prayers are part of practices of locality, albeit not in relation to particular locale or social network, but as directed towards the transcendental. According to this logic a successful football career can be ensured, at least in part, through religious practice and disposition. The footballers I interviewed hence expressed the importance of both training and prayer to achieve their desires, akin to the Christian monastic ideal of 'Ora et labora' – which hold to the idea of work as a spiritual practice as well as the pursuit of piety. Similarly, Saba Mahmood (2001) in exploring Egyptian Muslim women's local acts of cultivating piety, offers a notion of devotional practice that is helpful in this regard. She draws on the notion of *habitus* as 'a conscious effort at reorienting desires, brought about by the concordance of inward motives, outward actions, inclinations, and emotional states through the

repeated practice of virtuous deeds' (2001:212). This conception of prayer as practice helps us better understand the conception of religion and spirituality – ways of believing beyond the church (Giard 1996).

When it comes to talking about their plans for the future 'after football', religious beliefs again play a central role in the players' narratives. The careers of professional athletes are inevitably precarious, and after-careers are commonly viewed with uncertainty. Chinedu and Nneka's responses to questions regarding future migrations illustrated this:

> *I don't know – 2015 I don't know – anywhere God take[s] me to, so I don't know, I can't tell* (Chinedu).

> *Only God know[s] the next step … I told you I really am a Christian and if I say … I want to stay here but God say[s] he doesn't want me to stay here I will leave … if he say[s] he want[s] me to stay here I [will] stay here* (Nneka).

As a way of coping and creating meaning out of these uncertain futures, Chinedu and Nneka invoke the notion that God has a plan, and a 'destiny', in mind for them. So long as they stay faithful to God – in a relation of piety, they can maintain the belief that God will provide them with prosperity and success. Asamoah-Gyadu suggests that Pentecostal Christianities are particularly useful in this sense because they provide 'access to a set of powers embedded in a worldview of mystical causation', a type of belief that 'has demonstrated a strong ability to offer support to Africans who need to deal with those fears and insecurities that arise from transnational life' (2010:91). While traditional Protestantism assigns positive value to sacrifice and piety through the promise of ample rewards after death, Pentecostal teachings however, promise the faithful material rewards also in *this* life. As such, religious belief offers mechanisms for coping with stress and anxiety when it arises – through prayer and meditation – as well as a framework for creating meaning out of uncertainty and instability.

Existentialist sport psychologist Mark Nesti suggests that 'for the Christian athlete … suffering can be mediated through prayer (Watson & Czech 2005), contemplation and an acceptance that bearing one's cross is the path to salvation' (Nesti 2007:163). Religious belief, then, can offer opportunities for dealing with uncertainty when it arises in relation to career or

migratory futures. Because of their faith in God, and in the power of prayer to actualise aspirations, Chinedu and Nneka are able to assign positive value to uncertain futures. Their statements regarding future developments are not loaded with anxiety and doubt, but rather with hopefulness and belief that through continued practice of their faith they will be awarded with prosperity and wealth. Nevertheless, beyond playing a role in supporting career pursuits and making meaning out of hardship, religion matters in the lives of these migrants in far less instrumentalist ways; religious beliefs and practices are important in the religious lives of migrants. For these migrants, cultivating piety or spiritual disposition is an intrinsic part of their articulation and pursuit of professional, material aspirations.

## *Articulating Aspirations through Prayer*

The idea that transnational mobility is, at least partially, the result of prayers and positive confessions of faith, illustrates the extent to which religious belief frames understandings of career development among the migrants I interviewed. By maintaining the idea that God determines who becomes an international football player, a powerful explanatory framework is made available. Only those who make positive confessions of faith and continue to believe in the power of God are able to achieve their aspirations. Mahmood reminds us that cultivating a spiritual disposition 'is the means of both being and becoming a certain kind of person' (Mahmood 2001:215). By highlighting their submission to 'God's will' migrants can, for example, provide an explanation for why they and not another teammate have been given the opportunity to play professional football outside of Nigeria. Or, as is the case with Chiamaka below, such beliefs can offer explanations for why some migrants fall victim to fraudulent agents, who in exchange for large sums of money promise to bring hopeful prospective migrants to attractive clubs in Europe, while others do not. When Chiamaka was asked whether she had ever encountered a fraudulent scout or agent she responded as follows:

> *God has been so wonderful to me …. I never spent [money] just for people to bring me here. The man who brought me here …. God used him to give me that opportunity* (Chiamaka).

Although she could have responded that she has been lucky, or that she is too

'smart' to be fooled by a fraudulent agent, Chiamaka interprets her success as the result of God's favour. At first glance, her statement seems to suggest that she herself has played no significant role in her success. Her agency is masked by religious discourse and rhetoric. However, it is also through her efforts that favour is granted; by making positive confessions of faith, prosperity and success is achieved. Chiamaka's good fortune, hence, appears to be the result not only of God's gifts, but also the extent to which she has practiced and maintained her faith.

Although all the participants stated that prayer played an important role in them becoming successful footballers and achieving athletic mobility, the ways in which they articulated their aspirations differed, sometimes during the same interview. While at times specific goals were identified and prayed for, other times they would pray more generally for favour and blessings, without naming any particular goal or dream. When Chinedu, a young and relatively inexperienced migrant, was asked how she worked towards achieving her dream of playing professional football in Europe, she said that she spent a lot of time praying for God to assist her:

> *Yes, I'll be praying. Please God this is what I want, this is what I want. Please help me* (Chinedu).

Chinedu illustrates the practice of making a positive confession of faith; she names particular goals in order for these to be realised in her life. She exerts agency in determining which goals and aspirations that are to be actualised by God. While prayer is seen as a practice or habitus that can actualise dreams, prayer should also be recognised as a way in which to articulate aspirations. As such, the role of prayer and belief is two-fold: on the one hand it enables transcendental locality and the actualisation of aspirations (name and claim), while on the other it offers an avenue for articulating and communicating dreams and goals (habit and practice). Here, prayer becomes a way in which to speak meaningfully about career aspirations.

On other occasions, however, the participants did not name any particular aspirations, but would pray more generally for success and happiness.

> *I think this is the place [where] God want[s] me to be…I said please, direct me to a place where I will be happy, I will have a good contract,*

> *the people will love me, and when I came that was just how it [was]* (Onyeka).

Onyeka, although she does not name a particular club or country in which she would like to play football, states that athletic migration is one of her career goals. Through her prayers she articulates, and thus hopes to also actualise, a migratory aspiration. Onyeka suggests that while it was her dream to play football in another country, her arriving in Scandinavia was due to a plan God had made for her. She interprets the favourable conditions and her happiness as a sign that she has arrived at the location God had intended for her. Moreover, she suggests that it was not due to her own actions and choices, but through the direction of a transcendental God that she arrived there. By concluding that she is happy and successful because she is where God intended her to be, she mutes the role of her own actions and performances.

Chiamaka, similarly, also places emphasis on God's power rather than her own choices and talents when speaking about her migratory journey into Scandinavia:

> *I never knew I was going to come to trial in [Scandinavia]. I never know that there was a country called [Scandinavian country]. I never knew this was going to happen. And it was just God who just did it* (Chiamaka).

Although Chiamaka had thought about playing internationally she claimed that it was not by her own doing that she got an opportunity to do so. According to her interpretation, she had neither intended, nor worked actively towards gaining international visibility and recruitment; it was God who intended and effected her migration. As a result, prayer and faith in God are seen as necessary factors for producing mobility and becoming a successful athletic migrant. In the statements made by Chiamaka and Onyeka, prayers function to mute their individual roles and their agency in the development of migratory careers. Implicit in statements about success being a gift from God is the notion that only those who correctly practice their faith will receive these gifts; 'when people do not receive what they have confessed, it is usually because of a negative confession, unbelief or a failure to observe the divine laws' (Anderson 2004:218). This submission to God's power forms part of migrants' religious practice and efforts to be 'righteous before God' (Maier 2012:89). By living

righteously and faithfully, believers can ensure their own power and agency in relation to God (Maier 2012). Sometimes, however, the role of individual choices, skills and actions in effecting material transformation is masked by religious discourse and rhetoric.

## Conclusion

Religious practice is one of the most pronounced ways in which the participants in this study sustained and experienced their daily lives as migrants. Although their church participation and ways of worshipping differed considerably, religious beliefs and communities offered opportunities for belonging and forms of expression were not restrained by physical proximity. As such, religion provided a way in which to simultaneously be both 'here' and 'there'. In this article I have illustrated the important role that religious communities play for a group of highly-skilled labour migrants who travelled alone to places with small migrant populations. Through their religious affiliations they accessed communities of support and knowledge, related to the places they had left behind, where they have arrived, and where they intended to arrive in the future. Moreover, their faith helped them to form networks through which access to partners and intermediaries that were considered honest and reliable were facilitated. For the participants in this study, religious communities provided access to individuals that assisted with negotiating contracts and navigating new contexts. For labour migrants who travel alone to new contexts, religious affiliations also supply a sense of belonging to a (transnational) community.

Moreover, I have argued that, in migration, religious belonging matters not only in terms of the institutional and formal structures to which access is provided, but that informal, individual practices can be equally significant. By living faithfully, migrants ensure favour with God, a transcendental power that is considered able to effect or deny their career aspirations. In this, prayer plays a particularly significant role. By 'naming and claiming' their desires and aspirations through prayers, migrants are also working towards achieving mobility. Prayer, then, is also seen to promote material success and prosperity in life; it is understood as a way in which to achieve transnational mobility. Religious practices such as prayer provide an accessible site for the articulation of migratory aspirations, dreams, and desires, all of which form part of the 'mindwork' aspects of agency that precede and shape migratory journeys and experiences.

Lastly, I have shown how religious faith, practices, and communities provide migrants with important tools and resources. Whether in the initial stages of migration or at the end of a professional career, religious beliefs provide strategies for coping with anxiety and for creating meaning out of uncertain futures. Through prayer and belief in a transcendental power migrants can articulate and actualise their aspirations. What emerges clearly in the material I have presented is that despite the fact that (sports) labour migrants are acutely aware of their outstanding athletic abilities, they choose to articulate their success as being the result of faith and devotion. While this, on the one hand, reduces pressures inherent to individualistic and performance-based occupations such as professional sports, it may, on the other hand, contribute to an attitude whereby athletes surrender to circumstance as divinely predetermined. Nonetheless, 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.

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