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Taking roots in the name of God? Super-diversity and migrant Pentecostal churches' legitimation and social integration in post-apartheid South Africa

Self-publication, Göttingen 2017

DEDICATION iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS iv
ABSTRACT vii
CHAPTER I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION 1
I. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCHOLARLY CONTRIBUTION 10
II. EXISTING HYPOTHESIS AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS 16
CHAPTER II. CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS 27
INTRODUCTION 27
I. ORGANISATIONAL LEGITIMATION THEORY 29
II. ORGANISATIONAL INSTITUTIONALISATION MECHANISMS 54
CHAPTER III. BACKGROUND: PRECARITY AND THE PURSUIT OF THE VITAL "OTHERS" 64
INTRODUCTION 64
I. THE PECULARITY OF THE POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT ... 72
II. WHY CONGOLESE AND NIGERIAN PENTECOSTAL CHURCHES? 79
CHAPTER IV. METHODS 91
INTRODUCTION 91
I. RESEARCH DESIGN: A CROSS-SECTIONAL QUALITATIVE APPROACH 92
II. RESEARCH FIELD: JOHANNESBURG'S URBAN ESTUARIES 94
III. METHODOLOGICAL STRATEGIES 98
IV. DATA COLLECTION STRATEGIES 101
V. REFLECTING ON ISSUES OF POSITIONALITY AND TRUST 112
VI. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION 114
VII. LEAVING THE FIELD 118
VIII. ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS 118

CHAPTER V. CONSTRUCTING EXTERNAL LEGITIMACY: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND COMPETITION STRATEGIES 122
INTRODUCTION 122
I. THE RELIGIOUS RATIONAL CHOICE PERSPECTIVE 123
II. INFORMING STRATEGIES: PENTECOMERCIAL ADVERTISING AND OTHER COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN LEGITIMATED VOCABULARIES 132
III. LEGITIMATION BY CONFORMING 136
IV. MANIPULATING STRATEGIES: EXPLOITING LOCAL MYTHS, SYMBOLS, AND CEREMONIES 138
V. LEGITIMATION BY ASSOCIATION 141
VI. CHURCH "FRONTING" STRATEGIES 146
CONCLUSION 148
CHAPTER VI. THE PENTECOSTAL 'BIG MAN' SYNDROME AND THE LEGITIMATING EFFECT OF THE PRODUCTION OF RELIGIOUS GOODS IN THE HOST SOCIETY 150
INTRODUCTION 150
I. GENERATING LEGITIMACY THROUGH CHARISMA: A CASE STUDY OF A CONGOLESE EGLISE 155
II. CHARISMATIC LEGITIMATION: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE 163
III. EXPLAINING THE CULTURAL BASIS OF CHARISMATIC LEGITIMACY AND THE DIFFUSION OF THE DIVINELY "ANOINTED" PROPHET FIGURE 167
IV. OPERATING UNDER 'A STRONG VISITATION FROM THE LORD': ANALYSIS OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS' LEGITIMATING REDEMPTIVE NARRATIVES OF GENERATIVE AGENTIC SELVES 177
CONCLUSION 187
CHAPTER VII. CONSTRUCTING INTERNAL LEGITIMACY: TACTICAL CREOLISATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF BELONGING 191
INTRODUCTION 191
I. TACTICAL CREOLISATION: TOWARD A CONCEPT 196
II. THEORISING CULTURAL MIXING: PERSPECTIVES FROM CREOLISATION THEORY 198
III. EXPLAINING NEW SPACES OF SOUTH AFRICAN IDENTITY 206
IV. TACTICAL CREOLISATION IN PRACTICE 211
CONCLUSION 225
CHAPTER VIII. DISCUSSION AND GENERAL CONCLUSION 227
INTRODUCTION 227

I. ON THE USE OF ORGANISATIONAL APPROACH TO ANALYSE THE CHURCH 233
II. SUPERDIVERSITY AND INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVES 236
III. THE APPLICATION OF RELIGIOUS RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY TO CONGREGANTS' BEHAVIOUR IN THE POST-APARTHEID RELIGIOUS MARKET 241
IV. TACTICAL CREOLISATION AND THE PRODUCTION OF BELONGING: MITIGATING FACTORS FOR DIVERSITY COST AND ORGANISATIONAL CITIZENSHIP 248
A FINAL WORD 252
BIBLIOGRAPHY 257
ANNEXE ONE: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR MIGRANT CHURCH LEADERS 275
ANNEXE TWO: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR SOUTH AFRICAN CHURCH MEMBERS 279
THE AUTHOR 284

SUMMARY

The building of legitimacy and a sense of belonging and community out of their members are strong components of any form of organised religion, almost as important as their task of proselytising. How do migrant-initiated multicultural congregations located in social conflict prone contexts marked by rapid social transformation and superdiversification processes achieve this task? How do they manage the constant socio-cultural reconfiguration of such congregations? These are the broader questions this study explores analysing the case of Congolese and Nigerian migrant Pentecostal churches in post-apartheid South Africa. In fact, very few superdiverse settings have such complex intergroup dynamics as post-apartheid South Africa. The country has four reified "races" and multiple ethnic groups with different assertive Western and African cultural traditions, 11 official languages, multiple religions, multiple social classes, and a strident urban–rural divides deeply entangled. Between these four "races" there are people that the White minority deems "white-but-not-quite" and those that the large majority of Blacks find to fair or historically enough economically privileged previously that they cannot be Black. All this is loaded with the legacy of centuries of racial discrimination that remains visible everywhere in the form of massive White wealth next to deep Black poverty. The country experiences also a high level of crime that structures social distance and the geography of safety in cities along what is referred to as the new "economic and financial apartheid." Moreover, this mixed scene befalls in the midst of a massive ongoing rearrangement of power, laws, and social practices. Even power is divided along racial lines, with political power being dominated by Black Africans and economic power by Whites. These internal historically shaped dynamics of social segmentation with strong communitarian values has produced "strangers" everywhere in South Africa. After two decades of reconciliatory coexistence, South Africa has entered what has been recently called a negative moment lacking clarity, a moment when new antagonisms surface while old ones remain unresolved. These internal social fragmentations and antagonisms are, however, coupled with contrasting violent patterns of exclusive nationalist rhetoric toward mainly migrants from other African countries.

This general resentment of African migrants' presence in the country is not only widespread across all South African racial, ethnic, and social classes, but has increasingly led to a strong xenophobia (or Afrophobia) that regularly shows violent features. In fact, South Africa

is today the first destination of both regular and undocumented migration in Africa. As elsewhere, it is not so much the new large numbers of migrants that seem to constitute the problem. The problem seems to be the difference in appearance, language, social discipline and aptitudes that are seen as threats to domestic resources, social entitlements and tacit cultural habits. Yet in such a violent and migrant-unfriendly environment, we see a paradox in the numbers and social class and status of South Africans who are joining migrant-initiated Pentecostal churches. Are these religious organisations becoming "God's peace" retreat islands in the middle of the agitated waters of hate and violence? How are they able to generate social legitimacy and attract local lay church members in such hostile environment? How do they manage diversity issues and sustain local membership? In this study I explore how they do just that. I particularly discuss the strategies and approaches Congolese and Nigerian migrants' initiated Pentecostal churches manage new configurations of difference to sustain conviviality among their socio-culturally diverse lay church membership.

To answer the questions the study draws on data collected through the use of interviews and ethnography as well as visual data collection methods. In addition I took an organisational approach and I endeavoured to bring into integrative conversation multiple theoretical insights developed and discussed separately from migration studies, organisational theory, sociology of religion, and the emerging field of diversity studies. What the study broadly shows is the impact of social values and institutional templates on migrant religious organisations in context of superdiversification and social conflict. The findings show that migrant-initiated Pentecostal churches achieve local integration in post-apartheid South Africa mainly through four factors: (1) Africanization of the theology, (2) the efficient use of business-like aggressive religious marketing strategies, (3) the strategic construction of competitive charismatic personalities, and (4) the transformation of church organisational culture through the practice of what I term *tactical creolisation* conviviality and social cohesion strategies. Methodologically this study shows not only the fruitfulness of combining multiple data collection methods and the triangulation of multiple data, but also the fact that the church settings are "networked public spaces" where life is characterised by a flow of online and offline existence. This reality requires a shift in the way we conduct ethnography and enable researchers to keep pace with the ongoing digitalisation of social life which more and more unfolds situated at the intersection of both in person and online research.