

# “It’s a Big Umbrella”

## Uncertainty, Pentecostalism, and the Integration of Zimbabwe Exemption Permit Immigrants in Johannesburg, South Africa

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article questions the dominant narrative that considers displaced persons as victims, powerless, and lacking agency to shape their individual and collective conditions. Based on an ethnographic study of largely Zimbabwe Exemption Permit holders living in Johannesburg, the article argues that Pentecostalism offers an alternate worldview that draws on religious beliefs and practices to express triumph over everyday adversities and vicissitudes of forced mobility. The article concludes that such beliefs and practices embolden and espouse individual and collective agency among “born-again” migrants, as they mobilize religious social networks for individuals to make sense of the uncertainties engendered by displacement.

■ **KEYWORDS:** exemption permit, Johannesburg, Pentecostalism, South Africa, Zimbabwe

When my application [for a permit] was initially rejected, I felt dejected. But people at church helped me a lot (*vakandibatsira*), some in prayers (*minamoto*) [when resubmitting] while others chipped in with money (*mari*) for the permit<sup>1</sup> and countless trips to [the Department of] Home Affairs [offices]. One couple offered me a place to stay while I sorted my papers. After two reviews, I eventually got the [Zimbabwe Special] permit and I am currently working. Had it not been for the support (*rubatsiro*) I got from the church, I’d probably be back home [Zimbabwe]. I feel like the church is a big umbrella where everyone is protected. I’ve heard people who were in worse-off situations giving their testimonies on how the church stood by them. We’ve become a very close knit-family (*mhuri imwe*). (Narrative interview, Vincent,<sup>2</sup> male, July 2019)

These remarks mirror the everyday lived experiences of Zimbabwean immigrants I interacted with during fieldwork in Johannesburg, South Africa (hereafter SA). In the mid-1990s, Johnathan Bascom (1995) observed that studies on the integration of displaced persons in Africa, particularly refugees were unresearched and poorly understood. Since then, vast scholarship has addressed this lacuna, focusing on the role of religion in the integration of refugees in Africa (Ecke 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Gozdziaik and Shandy 2002; Mayer 2007). Yet, a handful of studies have explored the role Pentecostalism, the fastest-growing form of the Christian renewal movement in Africa, plays in the integration of displaced persons on the continent (Garner 2002; Lauterbach 2014; Nzayabino 2010; Sommers 2001). “Born-again” or Pentecostal Christians are estimated at around 650 million (Zurlo et al. 2020), making up 12 percent (107 million) of Africa’s population. In SA, *bazalwane* (brethren) or “born-again” are 57 percent of



the Christian population (Anderson 2005). In a southern Nigeria study, Ruth Marshall observed that “literally thousands of new [Pentecostal] churches and evangelical groups have cropped up in cities and towns, forming a broad-based religious movement which is rapidly becoming a powerful new and religious force” (1992: 7). This phenomenon characterizes several other African urban cities including Johannesburg where *bazalwane* churches have “mushroomed” in different localities owing to increased migration in the post-apartheid period since 1994.

### Exemption Permits and Everyday Uncertainties

Of the estimated 1.6 million Zimbabweans living in SA, around 250,000 are holders of a unique residence permit known as the Zimbabwe Exemption Permits (ZEPs) whose expiry date is December 2021 without the possibility of renewal.<sup>3</sup> The ZEPs succeeded the Zimbabwe Special Permit (ZSP) that had been issued to almost 198,000 immigrants in 2014.<sup>4</sup> These successive permit regimes followed the economic collapse in Zimbabwe in the mid-2000s resulting in a huge “influx” of (un)documented migrants to SA and beyond in what migration scholars refer to as the “third wave” of migration (Crush et al. 2015). The predominant scholarly discourse on Zimbabwean migration has been framed around the “crisis” trope, with emphasis on the multi-faceted “crises” in the post-2000 period (Moyo and Besada 2008; Crush and Tevera 2010; Cuffe 2017). I contend that Pentecostal beliefs and practices help the majority of ZEP holders who self-identify as “born-again” or Pentecostal navigate their present circumstances while remaining optimistic about a stable future. Take, for instance, the metaphor of “umbrella” that Vincent invokes in the prefatory narrative excerpt to depict the church as a sanctuary of hope, unity, support, and protection in the face of hostility and displacement. The metaphor further illuminates the critical importance of spiritual kinship, or “kinship reckoned concerning the divine” (Thomas et al. 2017: 3), for everyday sociality within translocal and transnational religious communities (Klaits 2017). While the narratives and everyday lived experiences are as diverse as the migrant population, what ties them together is the importance of faith in creating religious socialities that support “integration” in SA as in other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA). “It’s very difficult to make long-term plans when you don’t know your future in South Africa. . . . But you know what, I just put everything in God’s hands. *He* [God] brought me here, and *He* will make a plan for me,” said Nomsa, a 44-year-old working-class single mother of three children in one narrative interview. This situation’s significant impact permeates the everyday life of migrants, particularly their precarity on the labor market, social networks and friendships, housing, and access to medical help and justice. It creates a transitory and insecure identity and distinctive forms of social marginality that are compounded by *makwerekwere* identity<sup>5</sup> deployed as a form of “othering” black foreign migrants.

South Africa’s refugee regime, governed by the Refugees Act 130 of 1998 does not recognize “economic refugees” but affords asylum seekers the right to work, live, and access social benefits while their cases are being adjudicated. Because of these provisions, the vast majority of migrants from Zimbabwe entered SA on asylum claims that are regularly renewed, engendering a state of perpetual impermanency as holders are never assured of renewal upon expiry. Andrew, a 38-year-old automechanic and ZEP holder bemoaned that “when your permit is about to expire, you always keep your bags packed, in case they don’t renew it. There are thousands of cases of unrenewed permit. . . . If they [police or immigration officials] find you, you get locked up and deported. These days *magumbakumba* [deportation trucks] are not patrolling as they used to. So, most people just take the risk and continue to illegally stay in SA with expired *papers* [permits]” (Narrative interview, March 2019). How do ZEP holders make sense of the

uncertainties engendered by legal precarity in an environment generally unfriendly to black foreign migrants?

In addressing this question, this article explores how Vincent, Nomsa, Andrew, and several other immigrants in similar circumstances make sense of their temporality, uncertainty, and anxieties as “unwanted” and “unwelcome” guests experiencing “political (sub)alterity” (Riga et al. 2020: 709). While sense-making occurs at various levels, this article is concerned with both individual and group sense-making as Pentecostalism equips and positions itself to challenge the dominant discourse that views displaced migrants as “passive and compliant victims of violence” (Sommers 2001: 348) and/or a threat to the host communities. In the next section, I discuss the two dominant frames on refugee problematization, both in the media and scholarly discourse. I argue that ZEP migrants are in a state of perpetual impermanency as they are not guaranteed that their permits will be renewed upon expiry, a humanitarian logic or reason (Moyo 2018) that ensures that “unwanted” and “unwelcome” migrants leave SA and go back to their home countries. Next, I outline the study methodology followed by a presentation of the empirical data. I conclude by making a case that Pentecostal beliefs and practices enable displaced people in SA to express their individual and collective agency thereby challenging victimhood and threat tropes while mobilizing their translocal and transnational religious network.

### **Forced Displacement and Religion**

Overall, this article is situated at the intersection of religion and transnationalism studies (Adogame 2015; Levitt 2001). Erving Goffman observed that “frames are a central part of a culture and are institutionalized in various ways” (1981: 63). The media and the academy have largely framed refugees as victims of conflict in need of protection (Chouliaraki 2012; Mogire 2011; van Dijk 2009: 15). In SA for instance, refugees are perceived as victims who depend on the support of government and humanitarian agencies (Walker and Galvin 2018), a depiction that generates empathy for foreigners facing difficult circumstances. While this framing is probably appropriate in most cases such as wars, discrimination, and forced social or cultural behaviors, “the reality of refugee lives confound common perceptions of them as passive, compliant victims of violence” (Sommers 2001: 525). The second frame represents refugees as an existential threat to the economic, sociocultural, and religious well-being and security of host communities. Michael Addaney (2017) argues that most African countries plagued by economic crises and social problems use refugees as convenient scapegoats. Dale Buscher (2003) observes that in Sudan, the local population accuses refugees of being responsible for higher rents, intermittent shortages of necessities, overcrowded schools, and inadequate healthcare facilities, increasing crime rates and other urban ills. A comparable attitude is dominant in SA and other Sub-Saharan African countries where landlords and employers often take advantage of urban refugees who do not have legal protection by charging them higher rents or paying them less than locals with equivalent skills. A misconception persists that refugees cause an increase in crime rates in the urban areas (Hoffstaedter 2016).

Hanno Brankamp and Patricia Daley (2020) argue that the colonial legacies of anti-African migrant sentiment are pervasive across the continent. In studies from Kenya and Tanzania, the duo maintains that the two nations’ postcolonial migration regimes are saturated with a “pre-occupation with the rigid categories of race, ethnicity, and belonging when managing mobile Africans” (2020:114). A comparable situation prevails in SA where the local citizens’ antiforeign attitudes are not a spontaneous response to street-level tensions but are a reaction to limited opportunities that have, in turn, been legitimized by politicians and officials (Landau and Haupt

2007). Michael Neocosmos (2008) locates African xenophobia within South African nationalism and the apartheid/post-apartheid media discourse that constructed and sustained negative representations of African foreigners. The representations presented African foreign nationals, particularly Nigerians and Congolese, as “illegals,” “illegal aliens,” “illegal immigrants,” “criminals,” and “drug traffickers” (Matsinhe 2011). Also, the figure of *makwerekwere* has been constructed and effectively deployed as a form of Othering (Hankela 2014; Nyamnjoh 2006). Against this backdrop, it is important to understand how Pentecostal migrants navigate this precarity. How do ZEP migrants make sense of their everyday lived experience in hostile Johannesburg? The following section briefly describes the study which this article draws upon.

## Methodology

Employing a blend of grounded theory and narrative ethnography as both methods and forms of qualitative inquiry (Charmaz 2003; Connelly and Clandinin 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1990), this article draws on a research study that explored the spatio-temporal (re)configuration of translocal and transnational social relations among Zimbabwean “born-again” or Pentecostal migrants living in the northwestern suburbs (NWS) of Johannesburg. NWS is a conglomeration of thirty-two superdiverse (Vertovec 2007) suburbs with around 340,000 “White” (45.7 percent) residents followed by “Black Africans” (36.8 percent), “Asians” (7.5 percent), “Coloureds” (8.6 percent), and other groups (1.5 percent). I spent nine months as a participant-observer rotating between three migrant-established Pentecostal churches, participating in Sunday services and social gatherings, and I got involved in the daily life of my participants. House of Worship International Church (HOWIC), the largest of the three churches averaged five hundred congregants during weekly Sunday services. The services were predominantly conducted in *ChiShona* (a local language spoken by about 75 percent of Zimbabwean nationals) with simultaneous English translation. The other two churches, Deliverance International Church (DIC) and Family Prayer Church (FPC) (with weekly averages of 150–250 and 50 congregants, respectively) used English for preaching and conducting services. In all three churches, women made up the majority of congregants, although the leadership was predominantly men. Data analysis was an inductive and iterative process (Strauss and Corbin 1990), allowing emerging themes to be discussed in subsequent and follow-up narrative interviews with participants. The repeated revisiting of data was important for reflexive iteration, which allowed for insights and themes to emerge and enabled the refinement of the focus of the study (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009).

## *Ubuntu*, Spiritual Kinship, and Pentecostalism

As alluded to in the prefatory narrative, migrant churches are characterized by a strong sense of “community” (*gemeinschaft*) as symbolized by the metaphor of an “umbrella” as migrants feel bound closely together by a common purpose and intense social cohesion. In my informal conversations with members of the three churches, most referred to the fact that they are “one family” (*mhuri imwe*), “brothers,” “they are one,” “we look out for each other” (*tiri vawadzani*), and so on. There is a strong sense of *ubuntu* (humanness) (Hankela 2014) and spiritual kinship (Klaitis 2017). This is particularly important in anthropology and other disciplines as sacred or spiritual kinship goes beyond the classical conceptualization of kinship as “blood” or biological and other forms of fictive relations (Thomas et al. 2017). In a study among young Pentecos-

tal Burundian refugees in Tanzania, Marc Sommers (2001) noted that younger congregants exploited their church connections and social networks to obtain a patron who enabled them to work in Dar es Salaam's informal sector. These young refugees worked as tailors or fishermen; some sold coffee, and others helped other refugee entrepreneurs carry out their trading businesses. The young refugees' modus operandi of *kujificha* (to hide oneself) is a skill and survival strategy adopted by those living outside camps in Africa as they try to conceal their refugee identity.

The practice of *ubuntu* resonates with the notion of "imagined community" (Schüler 2008). Forced migrants deploy their Pentecostal beliefs to foster a sense of dignity and worth, as they are welcomed to a broader "community" of believers who share similar beliefs, values, and practices. In global Pentecostalism, an imagined global community is represented in the mental image of a global family of God, which also serves as a transnational concept of belonging (Schüler 2008). Such imagined communities are constructed in what Sebastian Schüler refers to as a "third space" where religious agents become globally connected (2008: 48). For this reason, the investigation of transnational religious networks in global Pentecostalism considers religious representations of space through everyday religious practice.

### Functional Appeal and Urban Fecundity

Pentecostal norms and practices account for its remarkable growth among forced migrants in Johannesburg. Over the course of my fieldwork, I noted that these norms include an emphasis on both the spiritual and material needs of people. Take for instance Memory, a ZEP holder in her forties, who started attending church services at FOWIC at the invitation of her friend because the "church felt like a family": "When someone has a problem, people pray for him or her, but also practical steps are taken to assist. For instance, when the ZEP program (*chirongwa*) started some people did not have *mari* (money) to apply, and the church chipped in. I used to go to another church where they just referred people to NGOs or other service providers with very little support. In the end, some people left and went to churches where they get practical support." This resonates with Michael Okyerefo's study in Accra, Ghana, among Pentecostal refugees. Okyerefo (2011) engaged "functional appeal" and "urban fecundity" as a useful analytic lens to account for the popularity of Pentecostalism among refugees since the religion appeals to individual needs. The functional appeal can be applied to survival migrants to find out what lures them, while urban fecundity focuses on survival migrants as potential members of Pentecostal churches in Johannesburg and other host cities of displaced persons in African cities.

However, while Okyerefo (2011) noted that church members in his study found a variety of features appealing about their church, such as the flexibility and open nature of the church in assigning leadership roles to anyone, my study revealed that social class and status played a huge role in the assignment of leadership roles. Some congregants lamented that *mhene* (affluent members of the church) were preferred for leadership as they consistently "paid" *chegumi* (monthly tithes) and contributed generously to the various church projects. While there is a strong sense of community in migrant-established Pentecostal churches, various markers of social difference such as class, education, income, profession, and legal status, among others engender social fissures. In one of my field diary entries I noted the following:

Church finished at 13:48 hours. As soon as the *ngoni dzerwendo* (grace) was given by one of the elders, people started trooping outside. It's like everyone can't wait to get outside for some fresh air after almost a four-and-half hour service. The church was packed. The win-

dow shutters were closed to minimize the Joburg winter breeze. Outside, congregants mixed and mingled as usual. I'm starting to observe a pattern that certain groups of people interact together. Those who don't own a car leave the church premises immediately after the church services to catch *taxis* (public transport), while those who drive hang around for a while chatting. They chat about all sorts of issues, ranging from informal business opportunities, review and preview of soccer matches, professional work, and church-related programs for the upcoming week. (Fieldnotes, 14 July 2019)

Sociologists and scholars of religion argue that one of the primary attractions of Pentecostalism in Africa is its capacity to appreciate a worldview among diverse African societies that bridges traditional and modern sociocultural elements of religion (Garrard 2009; Kalu 2002; Lindhardt 2015). Harvey Cox notes that the rapid spread of Pentecostalism is “like the spread of a salubrious contagion” (1995: 71), and it is a result of its rich and spontaneous spirituality. This appeals to people emotionally and the African Pentecostal message of healing and deliverance has not only attracted a huge following, with many “testifying” (*kukupura*) having been “liberated” (*kusunungurwa*) from sickness and evil spirits. Some adherents have actively converted to Pentecostalism as a means of deliverance from evil spirits associated with their lived experiences as displaced persons. In an informal chat with my Congolese barber in NWS central business district, he attributed his “breakthrough” to prayers and deliverance sessions he had with the prominent charismatic “Major 1”<sup>6</sup> in getting his refugee status granted after several attempts. In a sense, Pentecostals’ response to their displacement state “challenges widely held assumptions that refugees are passive victims in need of care from outsiders” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011: 430). The “deliverance” allows those who have been displaced, like Zimbabwean migrants, to deal with sociocultural, economic, and political forces that produce the adversities they experience. Pentecostalism challenges stereotypes and visual representations, which portray survival migrants as essentialized, passive, and helpless victims.

## **Conclusion: Whither Agency or Structure in Pentecostal Migrant Integration?**

This article focused on the ways that forced migrants who self-identify as “born-again” or Pentecostal deploy imageries, sensibilities, and practical actions to handle everyday uncertainties and ambiguities wrought by transient legal status in South Africa. The cases of Vincent, Memory, Nomsa, and Andrew provide brief insights on how migrants make use of religious affiliations to negotiate translocal belonging and deal with the state of “permanent temporariness” as ZEP holders. Such a state entails ZEP holders living a life in limbo as they are socially and legally insecure, both in the sense of uncertainty about their future and in the sense of being “deportable.” The article has also illustrated that despite these uncertainties, Pentecostal migrants express individual and collective agency as a “community” developing strategies to cope with their everyday precarity. However, the article also noted the tensions and fissures within the “community” based on differentiation in terms of migration history, educational background, legal status, length of residence, and economic background.

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## ■ NOTES

1. An administrative fee of South African Rand 1,090 (equivalent to US\$70) was charged for the processing of applications.
2. For the purposes of confidentiality, participant names and migrant-church affiliations are pseudonyms.
3. There are no reliable statistics on the number of Zimbabweans in SA due to various factors including porous borders resulting in huge inflows of undocumented migrants. Conservative estimates put the figure between 800,000 to 1 million (see Makina 2010).
4. The Zimbabwean Exemption Permits (ZEPs) replaced the Zimbabwean Special Permits (ZSPs) issued in 2014 and the Special Dispensation Permits for Zimbabweans (DZPs) issued in 2010. Under the DZPs, around 250,000 permits were issued while 197,000 were issued under the ZSPs. This series of special permits made it relatively easy for Zimbabwean nationals to legalize their stay in SA for work, study, or engage in legal business.
5. *Makwerekwere* is a derogatory term widely used by local South Africans to refer to black African foreigners.
6. Shepherd Bushiri is a Malawian founder and leader of Enlightened Christian Gathering (ECG), a neo-Pentecostal, transnational church based in South Africa.

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