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# Introduction: Portable Spirits and Itinerant People: Religion and Migration in South Africa in a Comparative Perspective

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## **On Xenophobia and Claims to Authenticity**

The wave of anti-immigrant violence in Johannesburg in May 2008 put the issue of migration into South Africa high on the political agenda.<sup>1</sup> Most residents in Johannesburg had experienced an ever-growing stream of migrants from across Africa, and to a lesser extent parts of Asia, into the city. However, the degree of tension between migrants and local South Africans in places like Alexandra, in informal settlements across the entire region, and in the inner city, had not been fully realised by the police and the authorities. The city had previously seen scattered examples of xenophobic attacks but never on a scale and with such vehemence as was witnessed in May 2008. Many commentators remarked that migrants once again were scapegoats, singled out as objects of hatred among locals whose frustration had now reached boiling point. The lack of visible improvements of the lives of the African majority, fifteen years after the new dispensation, caused broad disillusionment with the African National Congress (ANC) as a symbol of hope and freedom. The violence received broad support among ordinary people – ‘the foreigners are too arrogant’; ‘we must show them whose country it is’ were sentences one heard well before the attacks (see Hassim *et al.* 2008).

However, there seemed to be more at stake than the oft-repeated charges that foreigners were stealing jobs, privilege and also local women. Underneath seemed to linger a more fundamental and troubling question of whether there was a proper South African nation, or even a ‘society’ worth its name. How can one make a legitimate claim to being a part of South African society and its obvious wealth and opportunities? Who can be a fully entitled citizen, and who shall remain a temporary migrant and visitor? How can one be a proper and moral person in a deeply fragmented and violent society, riddled by crime and by rampant corruption, and deeply scarred by its past?

These were some of the questions that the arrival of large numbers of foreigners provoked in South Africa, both among South African citizens and among the

millions who had arrived as refugees and as economic migrants.<sup>2</sup> In classical social theory the figure of 'the stranger' is defined as both fascinating and unnerving because he/she upsets and ruptures the flow of ordinary and tacit assumptions that make it possible for everyday life to cohere and reproduce itself. In Simmel's classical essay on the stranger, it is the figure of the European Jew that is paradigmatic as an object of envy, suspicion and hatred (1971:143–9). Zygmunt Bauman has developed this further into the notion of the stranger as a form of 'third' and unsettling instance, upsetting the balance between the self and its known and well-established others, be they friends or foes (1991:1–101). The underlying assumption in these ideas of the stranger is that society basically exists in and of itself, as an entity within which both formal and informal rules are known to its members.

But what if a society does not cohere? What if it is so deeply segmented that people always are strangers to one another, even if they live in adjacent neighbourhoods or even in the same street? In South Africa, 'society' was for most of the twentieth century defined as 'white' whereas the majority population lived in 'tribal entities' or in contained urban townships whose institutions and forms of life were systematically starved, undermined and denigrated. In South Africa, familiarity and the comfort of the known, its sociality and accompanying rules, was for more than a century systematically defined and graded by skin colour. Strangers were everywhere, nearby, ubiquitous and yet deeply unfamiliar, even scary and shadowy presences. Sociality and familiarity – the hallmarks of 'society' in Simmel – mainly existed within racial groups, rarely between them.

In the early 1990s, South Africans began to develop new shared everyday and institutional practices across its racial segmentations, cautiously rallying around an incipient nationalism, shared icons and experiences. At this point, new categories of strangers also began to appear, particularly from the rest of Africa, in ever larger numbers. With this the idea of the stranger also began to change. White society was always a settler society, habitually incorporating newcomers provided they were of the right colour into a racialised sense of community. Most Africans from elsewhere on the continent had conventionally been returned to their country or territory of origin as their labour contracts expired. Now, many stayed and many more from across the continent were attracted to the economic opportunity and wealth of Johannesburg in particular. The newcomers were often of a rather different kind than the Mozambicans, Malawians and Lesotho citizens that were so well known from the mining compounds. The new South Africa with its freedoms and relatively open borders now appeared as a haven of peace to those who had suffered terrible persecution, war and displacement, particularly in central Africa, the horn of Africa and West Africa.

Many of these newcomers were well educated and resourceful; often more proud and confident about their cultural identity and place in the world than many South Africans who had been exposed to Bantu education and systematic exclusion and

repression for decades. New rifts and suspicions soon proliferated. Among South Africans, the most powerful myth soon became that all outsiders, whether refugees, students or resourceful business people, basically were parasites. Among the predominantly African immigrants, local South Africans were seen as amoral in their habits, as violent and defensive. This clash was especially tense in the Johannesburg inner city which became a densely populated, precarious and enormously risky world unto itself, riddled by violent crime but also new forms of enterprise and cultural-religious innovation (Simone 2004). However, tensions soon proliferated across informal settlements – where many Zimbabwean and Congolese refugees from war and suffering had gathered – and into the established townships where Somalis, Malawians and Senegalese began making themselves a home despite widespread hostility and recurrent attacks and lootings of their shops and homes.

Since 1994, new pertinent questions arose in the cultural and political imagination in South Africa and beyond as former deputy-president and later president Mbeki chose to promote South Africa as a site of a new African renaissance and perhaps also a home for all Africans, at least symbolically. But who was an African and who was a real South African? Could Africans from outside the borders be counted? Could the ethno-racial minorities in the country also be counted as autochthonous? Soon, two competing but also intersecting understandings of authentic belonging and rootedness in the nation, and in Africa, began to emerge. On the one hand the notion of autochthony, of age-old belonging to the land, the ancestral spirits and the original culture of the land. This was a discourse of transferable cultural essences and spirits that was widespread throughout Africa at this point and already well-embedded in the many ethnic ideologies and mythologies so eagerly promoted by the apartheid state (see Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Geschiere and Jackson 2006; Geschiere 2009). On the other hand, there was another form of authenticity and legitimate entitlement grounded in a shared experience of suffering, colonial exploitation and death at the hands of an oppressive regime. The spilling of blood and the sacrifice during the struggle against apartheid accorded authenticity and a certain spirit to both the spaces and the people of the otherwise soulless townships. This was the source from where the ANC was drawing the notion of proper ‘struggle credentials’ and from where the Truth and Reconciliation Commission began to establish a new master signifier of the suffering but forgiving African mother as the ideal new South African, the nation’s moral heart.

Interestingly, the rhetoric of an ‘African renaissance’ that came to mark the Mbeki presidency cut across both these understandings of cultural authority and authenticity, one based on blood and essence, the other on shared experience of suffering. It became clear to many South Africans that the cultural heart of the continent perhaps lay elsewhere, in regions less intensely exploited and alienated from themselves than their own country. There was a desire among some to connect with this other, more unadulterated Africa, which also in many cases had been

generous hosts to South Africans forced into political exile. In the heady days after 1994 there was indeed a strong sense that the last and important step in de-colonisation finally had been taken, by South Africans and by implication the rest of the continent as well. Public intellectuals, religious leaders and ordinary people were ready to accord cultural strength and also spiritual authenticity to migrants from other parts of Africa. Many South Africans would also readily admit that decades of subjugation and alienation in the massive townships of the country had broken traditional human ties of decency and everyday morality. Apartheid, and the long struggle against it, had damaged social relations in the country to the point of a complete moral breakdown and widespread anomie and intergenerational crisis. Especially the older generation, and many migrants and refugees coming from more conservative cultural contexts on the continent, saw the destructive crime wave and the AIDS pandemic as symptoms of this pervasive crisis of morality and breakdown of culture.

The very idea of authentic belonging through legitimate suffering also contained the seeds of a moral division between those 'proper' South Africans who had died and suffered for freedom, and those from other parts of Africa who merely arrived to enjoy the fruits and spoils of what local labour had built over generations. The compounded effect of both of these widespread notions of legitimate belonging has been that 'the migrant' increasingly today is understood in South Africa less as an individual escaping war or seeking a livelihood but as a category of powerful, well-connected, and at times dangerous figures. The stereotype of the African migrants as arrogant, with a self-assured cultural attitude and capacity for organisation and enterprise, legal or not, have made migrants objects of envy and resentment. Migrants are rumoured to possess what many an ordinary South African feel they no longer have: pride, cunning, economic capacity and spiritual power. This complex and evolving relationship, based on mutual stereotypes, apprehension but also new forms of social life, has been creative but also at times extremely violent.

### **Migrants, Religion and Cultural Authority in South Africa**

This special issue of *African Studies* seeks to unpack and explore the long-standing and complex relationships between migrants and locals in South Africa. Much of the writing and reflection on migration in South Africa has indeed diagnosed the problems and the conflicts within a South Africa horizon, privileging the 'native' South African point of view, while often tacitly assuming that migrants were in South Africa to stay. However, as several of the contributions to this volume demonstrate – notably Landau, Sadouni and Molins Lliteras – many migrants view South Africa as a point of transit or temporary dwelling. Like many other mobile populations in the world, migrants in South Africa do not necessarily desire permanent residence there. Johannesburg, Cape Town and other destinations are but one of several nodes in a transnational network constituted by kinship ties, ethnicity, or by religious imaginings and solidarities.

We propose to explore these new and emerging transnational worlds in South Africa by taking an informed, mainly ethnographic, look inside the discrete and multiple worlds of migrant groups in South Africa. Contributors focus on the role of religious practices and religious institutions in the internal dynamics among migrants, in their relationships with their homelands, and in the often dramatic interactions between migrants and locals in South Africa. The focus is on how religious languages, filiations and imaginings structure the way migrants make themselves 'at home' in South Africa, whether on a longer or a more temporary basis.

Scholarly research into religious practices and imaginings in South Africa and southern Africa have for decades been left mainly to historians and historical anthropologists (Comaroff 1985; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997). While this body of work has been seminal and extremely rich, research into the abundant worlds of contemporary religious practices in South Africa have for long been somewhat sidelined in the wider academic debate. This stands in glaring contrast to the flourishing scholarship on religious forms and dynamics elsewhere on the African continent. With this special issue of *African Studies*, we propose to enrich and open up the scope of understanding of what religion means, and does in contemporary South Africa. We bring together research that focuses on local and transnational religious practices among migrants in South Africa (Sadouni, Molins Lliteras and Jeannerat) with very thorough research on the social situation and life-strategies of African migrants living in Johannesburg (Landau) and a comparative piece that focuses on the portability and translatability of modern evangelical doctrines and practices between Latin America and Africa (Vásquez).

While we attempt to bring larger questions of migration, religion and identity to bear on local conditions and smaller migrant communities in South Africa, we also find it imperative to outline the specificity of the South African political and cultural context that frames all our contributions so decisively. Three fields of tension arise from the difficult constitution of a new South African (and African) cultural and religious imagination at the present juncture.

*Firstly*, there is the vexed question of how religious and cultural authority can be established and maintained in South Africa. For many of its citizens, modern South Africa may have been their home for generations but it is not their reference point in terms of religious and cultural authenticity. This lies elsewhere, for whites in Europe, for Indians in the Indian subcontinent or in the Middle East, and for many Africans either in a distant past, or elsewhere on the continent. The large urban spaces in South Africa are sites of struggle, success, tragedy, drama and aspiration but rarely sites of 'the proper' – neither the culturally nor the spiritually proper. Those domains lie elsewhere, in the ancestral land in the countryside (see for example White 2002) or elsewhere in the world. The significance of such a widespread sense of fundamental cultural and spiritual alienation cannot be over-estimated. As we know so well, the history of Christianity across Africa is the

story of a constant battle between two forms of authenticity. On one hand the missionary desire to clean up, reform, discipline and purify cultural practices to make them conform to 'proper' Christian practices elsewhere. On the other hand, a constant domestication, reinvention and vernacularisation of Christian practices and religious cosmologies among African church communities. These latter forms of African churches are still routinely dismissed as aberrations, a form of de-purification of the faith, by the more institutionalised churches.

Similar debates and conflicts have historically marked Islam across Africa. In South Africa, popular and vernacular practices among Cape Malays and Indian Muslims have been devalued and dismissed as mysticism and superstition by cultural elites who have reached out to the Middle East and to modernist and scriptural versions of Islam 'proper' in their quest for cultural strength, respectability and purity, if not an alternative universalism altogether.

One of the most arresting dimensions of this continuing question mark around (South) Africa's ability to sustain or produce the culturally 'proper' bears directly on migration: while the ordinary migrant is surrounded by suspicion and apprehension, the travelling preacher, pastor and religious specialist is often seen as the bearer of extraordinary wisdom, power and insight *qua* his non-local origin. Many societies attribute extraordinary charisma to powerful strangers (see Sahlins 1985). The widespread perception of South Africa as a somewhat deracinated and damaged society in need of salvation and cultural cleansing by people rooted in purer and more authentic cultures, make the foreign preacher particularly compelling. While the mobility of the migrant in general makes her/him a liability, or a potential threat, the peregrinations of the preacher are the very source of her/his authority.

*Secondly*, religious experience and religious practice are crucial to the hopes and aspirations for a new kind of self-making that the new post-apartheid society has ushered in. The end of apartheid is often described in quasi-religious terms as a form of redemption delivering the people of South Africa, trapped within the repressive police state, into a new and globalised present where self making and ideas of the self are no longer confined to racialised spaces and spheres. This entails a new embrace of a starkly consumption driven economy, of what Comaroff and Comaroff call a 'millennial capitalism' (2000). Here, the market holds out a promise of instant riches and gratifications through a wealth of commodities and images of a successful life. The market itself becomes a mythologised and entirely mystifying and non-transparent mechanism of complex exchange relations (Ashforth 2005).

The yearning for an escape from the oppressive provincialism that marked South Africa for so long, and the reach for something vaguely universal and modern, has often taken religious forms. The new, ostensibly egalitarian, consumer capitalism in South Africa does indeed promise inclusion into a globalised circulation of desire and commodities. Similarly, many of the flourishing religious movements

in the country also promise inclusion into something larger, more universal, more contemporary and powerful than what local religious institutions can deliver. The desire to escape from a dark and confined past in un-freedom into what promises to be a fully recognised place in the world remains strong across the country's still divided racial groups. At a national level, the hosting of the 2010 Soccer World Cup is indeed projected in quasi-religious terms as a momentous event promising true recognition and delivery from the past. Among many ordinary people, the reaching for the universal and the truly global and modern often takes place through religious practice – from the Pentecostal movements and churches that deftly mix a message of submission to God's will with a promise of becoming a fully empowered modern individual in control of body, soul, family and personal success. The Pentecostal pastors, many from elsewhere in Africa, also promise inclusion into a global community of believers. Among Muslims, modernist Islamic preachers also promises inclusion into a proud and defiant global community. They promise a modern, rational belief in a 'proper Islam' that can be fully integrated into a modern capitalist lifestyle and technological future but whose ethical injunctions can protect against the inherent excesses and immorality of the market.

In all cases, among South African citizens, the new migrant communities, and the various minority groups in the country, the embrace of 'the proper' – correct and devout religious practice, proper culture and community – also promises a sense of property (however temporary), a sense of propriety and a domestication of identity and belonging. The contributions in this special issue of *African Studies* all show in a variety of ways how religious practice and ethics produce a sense of belonging to a community, a sense of personal dignity and a claim to respect and recognition as a 'proper' person by the surrounding society.

*Thirdly*, there is the question of loyalty to one's ancestral or cultural home, and the new home which migrants build in South Africa. With the reinforced emphasis on autochthony and authentic belonging accompanying the new coalition of forces dominating South Africa after the end of the Mbeki era, the direct and indirect pressure on migrants to declare their loyalties is likely to increase. While the stigmatisation of the so-called *makwerekwere* (those who speak in an unintelligible language) has been going on, the increased presence and visibility of successful migrant communities and individuals is likely to provoke reactions and calls for stronger border control and more restrictive immigration laws. The situation after May 2008 has already presented new dilemmas to the migrant communities: how visible and audible can one be without provoking hostile reactions? Should one learn a South African language to conceal one's background? Is it safer to cluster one's residences in areas dominated by one's own group, or other migrants, in order to escape violence and harassment? How does a long-term future for the next generation of migrant minorities look in South Africa? These are all questions that frame daily existence for the majority of migrants in the country. For the educated and successful, the status as an African 'outsider', or a non-African

may seem less problematic than it does at the lower rungs on the socioeconomic ladder. It is among the poorest groups that the question of loyalty and belonging are asked most vehemently, and where the reprisals are likely to be the most violent. The use of different religious rituals and different languages in churches and mosques than those known to local South Africans have not yet become a target of critique and attack. During the nearly three weeks of violence in May 2008, churches and religious organisations were by far the most effective in providing shelter and protection. Religious symbols and institutions have not (yet) become symbols of the otherness of the migrants but this may not be a situation that lasts.<sup>3</sup> In other parts of the world – notably Europe, South Asia and Southeast Asia – it is religious identities and their various mundane manifestations in clothing, food and habits that have become the most controversial field of contestation of loyalty to a territorial home, or a cultural or ancestral home.

These three fields of tension frame and impinge on how the migrant communities explored in the following contributions are able to express and organise themselves locally through religious networks and practices. These tensions also frame how local South Africans interpret and make themselves at home in the new post-apartheid society through religious practices – many of them embracing ‘mobile religions’ that have calibrated their message and their rituals to easily portable, replicable and adaptable forms.

The following contributions grow out of a conference hosted by the Wits Institute For Social And Economic Research (WISER) in May 2008, which brought a number of South African scholars together with international scholars associated with the international research programme ‘The Religious Lives of Immigrant Minorities’. This programme is organised through the Social Science Research Council in New York and funded by the Ford Foundation and has been running since 2005. The project comprises a network of senior and junior scholars who pursue research on immigrant communities in three major cities: London, Kuala Lumpur and Johannesburg/Durban. The historical and national contexts in these three sites differ enormously, especially the force with which discourses of belonging and inclusion in a given society are thrown at migrants. The questions of religious authenticity and cultural authority as described in the South African case are also differently configured, and differently answered in other cases.

However, the fundamental tension between registers of local legitimacy and authenticity, and the force and authority of globally mobile religious movements, remain compelling in virtually every case investigated in this issue. Similarly, the social and cultural ‘work’ done by religious practices, in congregations, through religious networks and by the embrace of ethical norms derived from more or less personal theologies (see Jeannerat), is strikingly similar across the three cases.

We have included a piece by a scholar associated with the other nodes in this programme (Vásquez) in order to introduce a comparative perspective into our investigations. We also wish to facilitate a more intense and informed dialogue

between scholars working on these and related issues in southern Africa and those working in other parts of the world.

## The Contributions

*Loren B. Landau's* article opens the analysis of how migrants create an authentic belonging for themselves with a theme that flows throughout the articles, namely how migrants chose to integrate in their host communities.

*Susana Molins Llitas'* article deals with all three tensions that we raised above. In a case study of the Niassene branch of the Senegalese Tijaniyya in Cape Town, she argues that Senegalese migrants create authentic belonging for themselves by adhering to an expression of Islam that manifested in their home country.

In the situation of Somali refugees in Johannesburg, *Samadia Sadouni* approaches authentic belonging through the question of how the background of the migrants – both pre-migration as well as during the migratory passage – influences how migrants establish themselves in a host country.

*Caroline Jeannerat's* article describes how Christian migrants from Nigeria draw on Pentecostal Christianity to explain misfortune as being caused by witchcraft. These Christians consider authentic belonging as being located with God in an eternal sphere and access to it as defined by adherents to proper Pentecostal Christian practices, and misfortune to be caused by removal from God through witchcraft that is caused by the complete antithesis of God, evil. The article analyses the personal theologies that migrants establish on the basis of their adherence to Pentecostal conceptions in particular to understand the role that families play in the lives of migrants.

The last article of this special focus is a case study from outside of South Africa. The comparison *Manuel Vásquez* presents, however, makes the arguments around authentic belonging and the tensions this raises particularly visible.

## Notes

1. The violence claimed at least sixty-two deaths, of which twenty-one were South African citizens, and the displacement of over 200,000 people (Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa 2008a:7).
2. The number of migrants into South Africa since 1994 is highly disputed. It ranges from 2.5 million to 5 million, while claims are made for the presence of up to 9 million Zimbabweans in South Africa (Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa 2008b; Crush 2001; and Vigneswaran 2008:135–62).
3. A pointer in this direction took place in late November and early December 2008 in a prolonged discussion in the local newspaper *Northcliff-Melville Times* (of the Caxton Publishing House) on the permission that was being sought by Muslim residents in Albertville, a suburb in the west of Johannesburg, to build a new mosque. The debate was marked by the derogatory use of religious stereotypes.

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