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Fesenmyer, Leslie

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Ambitious cultural polyglots: Kenyan Pentecostals in London

By Leslie Fesenmyer

The lives of migrant Kenyans in London highlight the importance of religion, in their case Pentecostal Christianity, in social identifications and formations. Though religions have not been thought to constitute diasporas because they span more than one ethnic group and do not generally try to return to or create a homeland (Cohen 2008), Vasquez suggests that there are interesting similarities between religion and diaspora (Vasquez 2010). The case of Kenyan Pentecostals encourages us to think anew about their inter-relationship.

Having arrived in London during the 1990s to find no established community to welcome them, migrant Kenyans have since developed social relations rooted in their religious affiliations. They were at least nominal Christians in Kenya, primarily raised in the mainline denominations of their parents, such as Presbyterianism, Anglicanism, and Catholicism. In the years following their migration, however, many converted to Pentecostalism or re-dedicated themselves to God. Kenyan pastors have founded numerous churches in London and elsewhere in the UK, and churches play a central role in members' spiritual and social lives. Each week, churches hold Sunday services, often three hours long, mid-week services, prayer meetings, bible study, and other activities, such as choir practice, cell and fellowship meetings, and youth events.

Kenyan Pentecostals make sense of their experiences through their religion. Though they said they migrated to 'work' or 'study', they have recast their migration in religious terms – they seek to 'bring the UK back into the Kingdom of God'. This rationale can be understood in part as a response to their social, economic, and

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religious marginalisation in the UK. For example, a major issue their churches in London face is locating affordable, reliably available, and accessible spaces, which can accommodate their growing numbers. In the London borough of Newham, with its tremendous religious diversity, different religious groups compete to transform old cinemas, warehouses, shop fronts, and other non-traditional spaces into churches, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras. In Barking and Dagenham, a borough on the far eastern edge of London, churches face competition from businesses for mid-sized spaces, as well as resistance from the council, which wants to attract industry and thus jobs for local residents. In both boroughs, Kenyan Pentecostals turn to religion to make sense of why their efforts to ‘plant’ a church have been thwarted. Questions arise about favouritism toward non-Christian groups, and about the workings of the devil in frustrating their efforts to realise the will of God.

Yet, importantly, claiming to be religious missionaries to the UK also speaks to the evangelising mission of Pentecostalism and thus cannot be seen as solely or even primarily reactive. Kenyan Pentecostals heed the biblical injunction ‘to go and make disciples of all nations’ (Matthew 28: 16–20). In asserting their identity as Pentecostal Christians, they make a claim to a global religious identity and membership of a global religious community. Although one ethnic group – Kikuyu – predominates in many congregations, members are quick to distinguish between ‘culture’ and ‘religion’. With cosmopolitan aspirations, members come together as brothers and sisters in Christ. As one pastor remarked to me during a youth weekend at the church, ‘we do not want to raise our children to be Kenyans, Africans, or Kikuyus; instead, our ambition is for them to be able to succeed anywhere in the world’.

Kenyan Pentecostals conceptualise ‘home’ in radically de-territorialised terms – the Kingdom of God, rather than their place of origin, is their ‘ultimate’ home. Just as diasporas are oriented toward their homeland and their own eventual return, Kenyan Pentecostals aim to live their lives in ways which ensure they will be delivered to God. Their moral values and ideals – marriage, family, fidelity, and notions of gender complementarity – contribute to the creation of an emotionally significant community of belonging. This sense of

belonging is in part also constructed through practices of exclusion. They make a point, for example, of abstaining from alcohol, shunning British pub culture, and looking down on sexual promiscuity, all of which are seen as reflections of British ‘immorality’.

In addition to conducting services in English, they speak in tongues, known as *glossolalia*. The ability to do so is considered a gift from the Holy Spirit, which distinguishes Pentecostals from the rest of the Protestant world. This so-called universal language allows them to communicate directly with God in ways unmediated even by language. Their transnational ties are increasingly religious ones. While the churches in London are largely independent and were founded in the diaspora, pastors, lay leaders, and church members participate in transnational Pentecostal networks of churches and ministries. They travel to Kenya, the United States, and elsewhere in Europe to preach and fellowship. The community of which they are a part encompasses Pentecostal Christians around the world, who they see as kin related through the shared experience of becoming born again and through the blood of Jesus. In such ways Kenyan Pentecostals strive to be polyglots, able to traverse and transcend cultural, social, and linguistic boundaries.

Their religiosity helps to locate them in London, to link them to other Christians near and far, and to deliver them to God. In Tweed’s terms, it is locative (religion engages with the territorial location where believers live and contributes to the re-making of home locally), translocative (religion facilitates the creation of links across space where co-religionists live), and supralocative (religion transcends homeland and host land) (Tweed 1997). Conceptualising it in this way allows us to move away from categorising a religion as ‘ethnic’ or ‘universal’, and asking if it constitutes a diaspora, to focusing on how religion can help to reinforce and transcend place- and ethnic-based identities. Pentecostalism therefore helps Kenyan migrants maintain a consistent moral identity while navigating within, across, and between local, transnational, and global scales. □