

AFRICAN PENTECOSTALISM IN INDIA: BEING BORN AGAIN IN THE DIASPORA

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ABSTRACT

Over the past four decades, since the 1960s, there has been a steady flow of Africans moving to India for short-term activities: education, medical treatment and trade. There is a visible African diaspora in many localities in India. This diaspora is a layered one, consisting of diverse groups of people with different degrees of attachment to India: Africans settled in India with kinship ties, mobile professionals and students, and itinerant traders. Its composition and strength are in a constant flux. This paper will explore how debates and rituals in primarily Pentecostal-Charismatic churches – which have emerged as the focal point of community interaction for contemporary Africans in India – become crucial in shaping, reconfiguring and showcasing the markers of an imagined Africanness. Complex Pan-African diasporic subjectivities are invented, performed, and transmitted (from older residents to new arrivals), in conversation with prejudices and expectations of the host culture. These subjectivities are informed by educational and economic aspirations; visions of moral, personal, and corporate African progress, embedded in memoryscapes of an (Afro) future, articulated through the meta-language of African Pentecostalism.

BUILDING JERUSALEM IN MUMBAI

Mira Road is a relatively new suburb of north Mumbai (formerly Bombay). It was a sleepy, non-descript area about twenty years ago, out of the confines of the city. In the last three decades, Mumbai has expanded beyond its traditional limits, to engulf localities that were hitherto regarded as external to the city. Mira Road is easily accessed by the western railway line, from Churchgate, Bandra, and Andheri, the main nuclei of the city. Many

first-time migrants to the city – engaged in a variety of managerial, technical, and blue-collar industries – from other parts of the country, have established themselves there, by buying property and starting businesses. The area now boasts new housing and several commercial, educational, and recreational spaces. The area is relatively non-stratified, in that amongst its residents are an assortment of peoples of various ethno-linguistic, religious, and class groups.

In a five-storey commercial complex of Mira Road, housing several clothing outlets, office premises, and consultancies, is a small room used by the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG). The RCCG is a Nigerian Pentecostal-Charismatic ‘megachurch’ headquartered in Lagos. It has been headed by its General Overseer, Pastor Enoch Adeboye, a former university professor in Applied Mathematics, since 1981. It initially began its journey as a small ‘Aladura’ church, one of the many indigenous churches which sprang up in Nigeria after the 1950s, unique in their integration of local expression, ritual, and music in Christian praxis which differentiated them from the cultural trappings of European Mission Christianity.¹ Over the years, as the RCCG has metamorphosed from a local Nigerian church to a global ‘megachurch,’ it has witnessed a significant cultural and liturgical shift; reinvented its history, structure, and organisation; invested in a large educational, media, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) outreach programmes, and now has a presence in 195 countries worldwide (Premack 2015).² In 2017, Forbes magazine estimated that Adeboye’s net worth was between USD 39 and USD 65 million, with the church worldwide generating a profit of at least USD 2 million annually.³

The *modus operandi* of the RCCG resembles that of a typical Pentecostal-Charismatic African church. The RCCG was founded by Reverend Josiah Olufemi Akindayomi (1909-1980) (henceforth Josiah) in Nigeria in 1952, and largely drew a local following. The church has been operational in India for about two decades, established by Africans who migrated as students and eventually settled in India. Three quarters of its 3000 congregants in Mumbai are Africans, and the remainder are Indians. Their key beliefs are similar to many Nigerian/West African Pentecostal-Charismatic churches: belief in Jesus as the Lord and Saviour, the Holy Spirit as an equal element of the Trinity,

¹ John David Yeadon Peel, *Aladura: A religious movement among the Yoruba* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

² RCCG, Twitter: <https://twitter.com/rccghq> [Accessed: 15 Sep. 2021]; Laura Premack, ‘Prophets, evangelists and missionaries: Trans-Atlantic interactions in the emergence of Nigerian Pentecostalism,’ *Religion*, 45, 2, (2015), 221-38.

³ BBC, ‘Enoch Adeboye: Three facts wey make dis pastor still dey popular for Nigeria’, 2 Mar. 2019: <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-47429469> [Accessed: 15 Sep. 2021].

the Bible as divinely written by the Holy Spirit, and a focus on eschatology.⁴ Services are sometimes characterised by ‘speaking in tongues,’ the result of a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. There is an emphasis on healing for deliverance from demons, an interpretation of circumstance and misfortune shared by many African Pentecostal denominations.⁵ The focus on evangelism, on taking the gospel to the ‘ends of the earth,’ is reiterated by all members of the congregation as one of their primary goals.⁶

Several times a week, the room is full. A central figure is a Kenyan-born pastor, Thomas Ngugi,⁷ who is a naturalised Indian citizen. There are also two ‘elders’ or office bearers (from Nigeria, resident in India for close to a decade) charged with church activities, outreach, and administrative duties. Among the church’s 3000-strong membership in Mumbai are people of several African nationalities: mainly Nigerians, South Sudanese, Kenyans, and Zimbabweans. Not all Africans in Mumbai were Christian – there are Muslims from northern Nigeria, Sudan and elsewhere on the continent, who have made their way to the RCCG and various other African Pentecostal churches, becoming ‘Born Again’ in the diaspora. These churches have acquired a Pan-African character on account of the voice, networks, and sense of community they provide members of the African diaspora.

The RCCG has four parishes nearby in the outer suburbs of Mumbai, in addition to Mira Road: at Virar, Vasai, Nalasopara, and Kharghar. Each of these parishes has a strength of 500-750, with an approximately 3:1 ratio of Africans to Indians. Pentecostalism is not a recent import to India: it has a lively history in the country dating back to 1860s, and continues to proliferate.⁸ Some of the RCCG’s Indian ‘Born Agains’

⁴ Redeemed Christian Church of God: <http://rccg.org/> [Accessed: 21 July 2019].

⁵ Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press & International African Institute, 1999); Paul Gifford, *African Christianity: Its public role* (London: Hurst and Company, 1997).

⁶ For a discussion on Nigerian Pentecost-Charismatic churches, see: Ruth Marshall-Fratani, “Mediating the global and the local in Nigerian Pentecostalism,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28, 3 (1988), 278-315.

⁷ Names of respondents have been changed throughout this piece, in order to maintain anonymity. The politics of religion and religious conversion in India are contentious issues, especially against the backdrop of the rise of the Hindu right (discussed in some detail in the following sections).

⁸ See: Stanley M. Burgess, “Pentecostalism in India: An overview,” *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 4, 1 (2001), 85-98; Gary B. McGee, “‘Latter rain’ falling in the East: Early-twentieth century Pentecostalism in India and the debate over speaking in tongues,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and culture*, 68, 3 (1999), 648-65. A series of Pentecostal-like revivals occurred in South India in 1860-61 and 1874-75. In both cases, charismatic gifts (prophecy, glossolalia, glossographia, and interpretation of tongues) and other Pentecostal phenomena (prayer for the sick, falling down and shaking, as well as restoration of the offices of apostle and prophet) were present. The leader was John Christian Aroolappen, an Anglican catechist who had been trained by pietistic missionaries. Pentecostalism also counted amongst its initial proponents high-caste, outwardly mobile individuals, such as Pandita Ramabai, who occupied a complicated position on account of being a Brahmin and a woman. See Allan Anderson, “Pandita Ramabai, the Mukti Revival and Global

trace their roots to localities in the country with traditionally large Catholic and Protestant communities, mainly Goa, Mangalore, and parts of Tamil Nadu.⁹ About half the Indian congregants are from non-Christian backgrounds, and are first generation converts to Pentecostalism, cutting across social class, income brackets, linguistic backgrounds, and caste. The gender composition of these parishes is skewed towards men, who outnumber women slightly, a reflection of the fact that a larger number of men are more likely to migrate independently, for business activities and study, than women.

A number of activities are organised and coordinated by church elders and youth wings. Special prayer camps are held several times a year, where congregants are invited to attend. Activities focus on prayer and meditation. A Bible study group meets twice a week. A special healing session is conducted every Wednesday and Friday evening, which focusses on what the Pentecostal literature broadly refers to as ‘demonology,’ or an understanding of how evil forces impede the spiritual, bodily and material well-being of a Christian. The RCCG’s leadership describes the moral space and network of the church as a new ‘Jerusalem,’ a sacred space, pivotal to notions of how they view their position as the core of a burgeoning Christian community.

A three-hour Sunday church service is the highlight of the week. These are characterised by readings from the Bible, preaching, song, dance, healing, and prayer. The Kenyan pastor’s sermons (in English) are simultaneously translated for the benefit of an Indian audience in Hindi, and the proceedings of church services are always bilingual. The translation is for all to see that ‘an African church has a solution for India and Indians,’¹⁰ an indication of the RCCGs’s implicit focus on indigenisation and evangelism. Among the Mission and Vision of the RCCG, widely disseminated on its website, six main goals are identified:¹¹

To make heaven.

Pentecostalism,” *Transformations*, 23, 1 (2006), 37-48; McGee, “‘Latter Rain’,” 648-65. Ramabai’s Mukti mission, though retrospectively inserted into the historiography as a key event in Indian Pentecostalism, was primarily a powerful critique of caste inequalities, with anti-caste activism and reform central to its operational agenda. See: Yan Suarsana, “Inventing Pentecostalism. Pandita Ramabai and the Mukti Revival from a postcolonial perspective,” *PentecoStudies*, 13, 2 (2014), 173-96.

⁹ By the middle of the year 2000, Pentecostalism in India has grown to approximately 33.5 million strong, ranking fifth in the world (behind Brazil, the United States, China, and Nigeria) for total numbers in the renewal. Burgess, “Pentecostalism in India,” 85-98.

¹⁰ Interview with an Elder of the RCCG church, Mumbai, 21 Apr. 2019.

¹¹ The Redeemed Christian Church of God: <http://rccg.org/who-we-are/mission-and-vision/> [Accessed: 23 July 2019].

To take as many people with us.

To have a member of RCCG in every family of all nations.

To accomplish No. 1 above, holiness will be our lifestyle.

To accomplish No. 2 and 3 above, we will plant churches within five minutes walking distance in every city and town of developing countries and within five minutes driving distance in every city and town of developed countries.

We will pursue these objectives until every Nation in the world is reached for the Lord Jesus Christ.

The legal document specifies the name of the church as ‘The Redeemed Christian Church of God,’ and identifies twelve objectives for the establishment of the group, from which the Mission and Vision are derived.¹² The first and most important of these states that the church is established:

To evangelise the world in the name of Jesus Christ and to propagate the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Art. 1. 3a).

The second objective states in a similar vein that the church functions:

To convert the heathen and pagan to the Christian faith and to establish Churches and Missions throughout the world (Art. 1. 3b).

This paper focusses on four themes. First, it outlines the modalities of African migration to India, to illustrate how the recent diaspora differs from movements in the past. Second, it examines how beliefs, practices, and networks which emerge through the RCCG, many of which are common to other African churches in Mumbai, produce a corporate African diasporic subjectivity in India. Third, it explores how the collective rituals which facilitate personal transformations help Africans in Mumbai understand their *raison d’être* in India. Fourth, it analyses how these emergent diasporic Pentecostal subjects construct their positions within their host society (India).

¹² Asonzeh Ukah, “The Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG, Nigeria). Local identities and global processes in African Pentecostalism” (Unpublished PhD diss.: University of Bayreuth, 2003).

AFRICAN DIASPORAS IN INDIA: PAST AND PRESENT

Africans have moved to India for centuries, as missionaries, traders, seamen, and enslaved, and they have been a part of the social fabric of the Indian subcontinent. Innumerable accounts of Africans in medieval India exist. The accounts of the thirteenth century traveller, Ibn Battuta, indicate a largescale presence of Africans at port cities: ‘At Qandahar [Gandhar], we embarked on a ship which had a complement of fifty rowers and fifty Abyssinian men-at-arms.’ These Abyssinians were employed by the Indian mercantile elite, to guarantee safety across oceanic journeys.¹³ The Russian traveller Athanasius Nikitin, who journeyed through India from 1468 to 1474, writes of the presence of peoples from the Horn of Africa in places such as Dabhol, located about 160km south of contemporary Mumbai. Nikitin’s accounts reveal that the vizier of the Bahmani King, Mohammed Gawan, was an African. In Gulbarga and Bidar in the Deccan, he documented a thriving trade in horses, silk damask, and ‘blackslaves.’¹⁴ The English merchant William Finch, who travelled to India as an agent of the East India Company (EIC), observed in 1610 that Malik Ambar¹⁵ commanded ‘some ten thousand of his own [caste], all brave soldiers, and some forty thousand Deccanese,’ an indication that Africans, mainly from the Horn, were significantly represented and assimilated amongst their Maratha hosts.¹⁶ The demand for Indian textiles in the Horn, and the burgeoning triangular cloth-ivory-slave trade in the Indian Ocean facilitated the (forced) migration of peoples of the Horn of Africa to India, and both elite Deccanis and Africans manipulated this movement of people to their advantage.¹⁷ But what ensued and how the peoples of the Horn were integrated into the social and genetic fabric of the Indian subcontinent is largely unknown, under-researched, or perhaps even wilfully obliterated from history and memory.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the English EIC officer, Orientalist, and explorer, Richard Burton, reported that 600-700 Africans were arriving annually into Gujarat and Sindh.¹⁸ Describing the Africans in Sindh, Burton refers to the two kinds of African slaves, the *ghara-jao* or slaves who were born locally, and others who were

¹³ Purnima Mehta Bhatt, *The African Diaspora in India: Assimilation, change and cultural survivals* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

¹⁵ Prime Minister of Ahmadnagar, born in Ethiopia, and brought to India in slavery via Baghdad by Arab slave-dealers.

¹⁶ Bhatt, *The African Diaspora in India*, 29.

¹⁷ Richard M. Eaton, *A Social History of The Deccan: Eight Indian lives, 1300-1761* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 107-28.

¹⁸ Cited in: Bhatt, *The African Diaspora in India*, 29.

imported from Muscat and the other ports in the Persian Gulf.¹⁹ Over these four centuries, the slave trade was largely perpetuated by commercial networks established by Gujarati traders in search for markets for cloth produced in Gujarat. What remains today, of the vestiges of a recognisable African community, is in the form of the Siddis, who came to India from the eighteenth century onwards. They have survived as a visible African community, as assimilation and integration were harder from the eighteenth century onwards, on account of a reconfiguration of Indian society based on colonial laws, development of ‘caste’ structures which reinforced endogamy, and emergent social stratification that remains recognisable today. The exact origins, language, and modalities of migration of this community are little known, on account of the diverse, layered waves of movement out of Africa. Some scholars argue that ‘Africanness’ is an embedded memory, kept alive through music, culture and memory,²⁰ while others believe this Africanness is largely ‘reinvented’ and ‘performed’ to align with a public memory which assigns to the Siddis African roots.²¹

* * *

Today, Mumbai and the state of Maharashtra is home to about 5,000-7,000 Africans.²² They have journeyed to India for various purposes. Many of them arrived within the last two decades, and are bound to India through ties of family, kin, and work. Some of them are less established, in that they are repetitive itinerant travellers for commercial reasons.

The vast majority of Africans arrived as students. Indian government scholarship schemes offered Africans the opportunity to study undergraduate, postgraduate and technical courses in India from 1964. These were targeted at countries where India was vying for influence – Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and the Indian ocean rim – but was later expanded to include many other anglophone and francophone African countries. Many other privately funded students found their way to India from parts of Africa, attracted by English-based education, relatively lower costs, and marketing by Indian private institutions. A large number of Nigerians, from the Igbo-speaking belt in particular, arrived around 2000, learning about educational and business opportunities through extended kin and networks already settled in Mumbai.²³

¹⁹ Cited in: *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁰ See: *Ibid.*, *passim*.

²¹ Helene Basu, “Africans in India: Past and present,” *Internationales Asienforum*, 32, 3-4 (2001), 253-74.

²² Information gathered during fieldwork, Mumbai June 2017-ongoing.

²³ Information gathered during fieldwork, Mumbai June 2017-ongoing.

About half of the 5,000-7,000 Africans settled in Mumbai and its environs are married to Indian citizens. Indian citizenship laws make them eligible for full Indian nationality after seven years of legal residence in India after marriage to an Indian citizen. A reduced form of nationality known as an Overseas Citizen of India (OCI), may be obtained after two years of residence in the country and marriage to an Indian citizen.²⁴ Many settled Africans with Indian nationality or OCI status are educated up to postgraduate levels or have technical qualifications, and work in offices, own small export businesses, or are teachers in local schools.

A small number of Africans, from Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Nigeria, arrived in India as Christian missionaries in the 1990s-2000s, when the requirements to enter the country as a 'religious visitor' were more relaxed than they are today. They continue to work in the many evangelical churches that have mushroomed to cater to both African and urban Indian Pentecostals. Most of this category of people also have settled status on account of the time spent in the country. Some of these are irregular migrants, in that they have been unable to secure legal status, and are forced to live under the radar of the authorities. Yet others (mainly from South Sudan and Sudan) are refugees, registered with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), awaiting either temporary protected status in India, or resettlement elsewhere.²⁵

A loose outer core of the community is constituted by seasonal visitors or itinerant travellers, who repeatedly spend a sizeable portion of the year in India for business activities. This constituency consists of people involved in the export of mainly textiles, leather, handicrafts, and small machinery from India to their home countries. Immigration laws mean that they are allowed to reside in India for 180 days per entry. This constituency is also heavily supported by the settled Africans in India and the student community, when it comes to operational logistics and legal matters involving their commercial activities, and to a lesser extent on Indian business partners cultivated through educational networks. As in the case of the African diaspora in other parts of Asia, many students temporarily resident in India are also engaged in the provision of services to the broader African

²⁴ An OCI enjoys most legal rights as an Indian citizen, but may not vote or stand for election, or own land in certain areas of the country. See: Overseas Citizen of India: <https://ociservices.gov.in/> [Accessed: 26 July 2019].

²⁵ India does not have an enshrined policy on refugee protection. For an in-depth discussion on the situations that the lack of a refugee policy creates in India, see: Bani Gill, "In the shadow of illegality: The everyday life of African migrants in Delhi" (Unpublished PhD diss.: University of Copenhagen, 2019).

community: they run food stores, restaurants, and hair salons out of private spaces and homes.²⁶

Contemporary migrations to India, from diverse parts of the continent – from the Indian Ocean rim and beyond – are similar in the modalities of past migrations from Africa, in that they are temporally layered, with disparate groups of people having arrived in different waves, forced to identify under the corporate banner of ‘Africanness’ in their host society. Within the African diaspora, there are varying degrees of attachment to, and emotional and economic investment in, their host society. The experience of being in a diaspora in India in particular, sees disparate groups of Africans reinvent their moral agendas and reasons for migration, through organisations such as the RCCG and other similar African Pentecostal churches. Thus, this African identity is a dynamic work-in-progress, constantly reinvented by narratives, rituals and performance, rather than a reproduction of an essentialised understanding of culture.²⁷

DAYS OF SMALL THINGS: THE RCCG IN INDIA

For who hath despised the day of small things? for they shall rejoice, and see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven; they are the eyes of the Lord, which run to and from through the whole world. (Zechariah 4: 10)

RCCG leaders and elders, in India and elsewhere, when questioned about the origins of the church, often quote the above biblical verse, likening the genesis and growth of the church, in its birthplace Nigeria, and now in India, to the ‘day of small things’ of ‘the select stone’ engineered by God, destined for great rejoicing at the end time. The RCCG’s expansion out of Africa and its ‘reverse mission’ agenda grew out of visions of the founder to ‘preach in the Whiteman’s land.’²⁸ The church is well-established in North America and Europe on account of migration out of Nigeria and Africa.²⁹

²⁶ For case study on Malaysia, see: Ute Röschenhaler, “African businesses in Malaysia: ‘You just have to be smart to survive,’” in *Mobility Between Africa, Asia and Latin America: Economic networks and cultural interactions*, eds. Ute Roschenhaler and Alessandro Jedlowski (London: Zed, 2017), 156-80.

²⁷ Stuart Hall, “Cultural identity and diaspora,” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), 222-37.

²⁸ Ukah, “The Redeemed Christian Church,” 75. For RCCG members, the Whiteman’s land is synonymous with the ‘Post Christian’ Global North, where the Gospel has been ‘forgotten’ and where people have relapsed into Sin.

²⁹ Afe Adogame, “Raising champions, taking territories: African churches and the mapping of new religious landscapes in diaspora,” in *The African Diaspora and the Study of Religion*, ed. Theodore Louis Trost (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 17-34.

This biblical verse, the cornerstone of the identity of the RCCG's congregants, assumes a heightened significance in the Indian context. India is a 'pagan' land, with a non-Christian majority, living in ignorance of the Gospel. The recent rise of religious intolerance and antagonism directed towards non-Hindu minorities, and spectacular incidents against Christian evangelists, gives the RCCG a special vigour of operating in a hostile environment.³⁰ Churches are required to be registered as NGOs or charities, a procedure which has become more cumbersome in recent years. Broadcasting rights are bestowed upon churches after tedious negotiations with authorities. Religious visitor visas are granted after much surveillance, if at all.³¹ A number of Indian states have recently passed controversial 'anti-conversion' laws, aimed at regulating the evangelical activities of Christian churches and Islamic institutions, based on the perception that these religious groups are converting subaltern groups (Dalits,³² tribals and the economically marginalised) for financial gain.³³ RCCG members – and African members in particular – often speak of themselves as 'warriors' or 'crusaders,' with their aim being to spread the Gospel in India, against the existing odds.

The RCCG in itself has been successful outside Nigeria, as it is organised as a 'mobile network,' a 'portable religion.'³⁴ Members of the church who move geographies are either required to join existing churches in their new locations or start a branch of the RCCG there. The need for expansion and evangelism prompted reengineering within the structures and liturgical practices of the RCCG, making it easy for non-pastors to start congregations. Two or three members outside Nigeria may constitute a fellowship, and from there a church. The ritual of ecclesiastical ordination is not necessary for officiating at services. Different local parishes of the church are mandated to establish parishes abroad through their members who are living outside the country. These migrant churches act as mobilisers of resources such as funds and know-how that are sometimes transmitted to the local mother church.³⁵ Similarly, the RCCG in Mumbai was founded about fifteen

³⁰ Nathaniel Roberts, "Transformation and the suffering subject: Caste/class and gender in slum Pentecostal discourse," in *Dalit Women: Vanguard of an alternative politics in India*, eds. Karin Kapadia and S. Anandhi (New York: Routledge, 2017), 279-304; Nathaniel Roberts, *To Be Cared For: The power of conversion and foreignness of belonging in an Indian Slum* (California: University of California Press, 2016).

³¹ Information gathered during fieldwork, Mumbai June 2017-ongoing.

³² Dalit = oppressed, a corporate term to denote historically underprivileged castes protected by the Indian constitution and subjected to affirmative action strategies.

³³ Library of Congress, "State anti-conversion laws in India," Oct. 2018: <https://www.loc.gov/law/help/anti-conversion-laws/india.php> [Accessed: 21 Oct. 2019]. See also: Roberts, "Transformation and the suffering subject," 279-304; Roberts, *To Be Cared For*.

³⁴ Ukah, "The Redeemed Christian Church," 282.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

years ago by Nigerians, and began as a fellowship attracting largely diasporic Nigerians in its early years. Details of the RCCG's finances in India, from its formative years to the present, are unknown, but could have reflected the pattern of other branches in new geographies detailed by previous academic work.³⁶

The RCCG's Indian adherents come from a variety of backgrounds. A small number of them are from well-established Christian communities in India.³⁷ Yet others are of Dalit backgrounds, first or second generation converts to Pentecostalism. A small number are first generation converts from upper-caste backgrounds. South Asianists have long argued that conversion from Hinduism was in itself a social protest against the injustices of the hereditary caste system. In 1956, half a million Dalits (the 'untouchables', placed at the bottom of the caste system), converted to Buddhism, inspired by their charismatic leader, B.R. Ambedkar. Many other mass conversions to Buddhism by Dalits followed in the ensuing decades. Their conversion was, among other things, a symbolic protest against segregation, discrimination, and scriptural legitimacy of caste within Hinduism. Over the colonial and postcolonial eras, many socially disadvantaged groups also converted to various denominations of Christianity in a quest to erase their identities, and to access modern education and improve their chances of social mobility.³⁸ Pentecostalism, with its emphasis on individual transformation, decentralised power structures, and ease of access to the divine sphere was particularly appealing. The reasons for conversion are complex: beside serving as a moral critique of entrenched casteism, conversion in itself also facilitated the reimagining of gender, patriarchy, class, and the idea of a religious identity as an essentialised, hereditary feature to a more fluid, hybrid, utilitarian practice for marginalised groups.³⁹ In recent years, the evangelical activities of homegrown and foreign Pentecostal churches, in particular, have caused great anxiety amongst the Hindu political right, who have encouraged reconversions (*ghar wapsi*, literally 'return home') to Hinduism. Churches such as the RCCG, whose leaders and office bearers are recent African arrivals in India and are somewhat detached from the local politics of caste and conversion, occupy an ambiguous place in the Christian landscape in India. Apart from the spiritual dimensions of being born again, for these Indian adherents, the RCCG's appeal is its transnational, multi-ethnic, multi-racial

³⁶ Ibid., *passim*; Ukah, "The Redeemed Christian Church."

³⁷ India was also home to many pre-modern Christian communities, such as the Syrian Christians of Kerala, who trace the origins of their faith to the evangelical activities of Thomas the apostle as early as the first century AD, and the Roman Catholics of Goa, who converted after Goa gradually came under Portuguese rule from the sixteenth century.

³⁸ V. V. Thomas, *Dalit Pentecostalism: Spirituality of the empowered poor* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Company, 2008).

³⁹ Roberts, "Transformation and the suffering subject," 279-304; Roberts, *To Be Cared For*.

character, which ties them into a Global vision for Christendom, ignoring local contestations over conversion in the national space.

FROM BABEL TO PENTECOST

Africans in contemporary Mumbai hail from a number of countries, including from Nigeria, South Sudan, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, The Gambia and Eritrea (in order of numerical strength).⁴⁰ The oldest layer of the multifaceted African diaspora consisted of Igbo-speaking and Yoruba-speaking Nigerians. Many of them came to India initially as students before settling down. Prior to the 2000s, the Nigerian community was largely organised into ethnic-based hometown associations, described in academic literature elsewhere in the world.⁴¹ These associations linked members from similar states, or even towns if they had adequate numbers of members, in Nigeria, serving as a space for support with regard to legal issues, conflicts with the law, and a platform for business opportunities. These hometown associations also lobbied (unsuccessfully) in Mumbai for relaxed immigration rules and inclusion into local business platforms during the 2000s. These organisations were partially successful in negotiating commercial relationships of the nature described elsewhere in the world with members of their host community, with respect to small-scale trade and investment, precipitating a ‘low-end globalisation.’⁴² On account of their ethnic character, they concentrated on issues relevant to their original localities, and were limited in their memberships by the number of people who hailed from a similar locality.

Several Pan-African bodies emerged to attempt to bring together diasporic Africans. Students and business-people, largely from eastern and southern Africa, encompassing mainly Kenyans, Tanzanians, Zimbabweans, and later South Sudanese, functioned as a loose network, lobbying for similar issues in the 2000s-2010s. The Association of African Students of India (AASI), an all-India body founded in New Delhi in 1962, that networks all African students in the country, also enjoyed several short-spells of success in representing all Africans in Mumbai, albeit briefly, during 1998-99, the mid-2000s, and 2016-17.

⁴⁰ Information gathered during fieldwork, Mumbai June 2017-ongoing.

⁴¹ Ben Lampert, “Nigerian organizations in London and the transnational politics of belonging,” *Global Networks*, 9, 2 (2009), 162-84.

⁴² Gordon Mathews and Yang Yang, “How Africans pursue low-end globalization in Hong Kong and mainland China,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs*, 41, 2 (2012), 95-120; Lawrence Marfaing and Alena Thiel, “African entrepreneurs in China: True actors of globalisation,” in *Mobility Between Africa, Asia and Latin America: Economic networks and cultural interactions*, eds. Ute Rosenthaler and Alessandro Jedlowski (London: Zed, 2017), 200-18.

Most of these bodies became impotent on account of lack of funding, leadership, and divergence of aims of different constituencies within them. Different legal statuses ascribed by India to different nationalities also contributed to the lack of coordination of agendas of Pan-African bodies. For instance, the issue of less cumbersome visa extensions was on the agenda of Nigerians and other West Africans, while South Sudanese, Sudanese, and Eritreans were caught in a space between the UNHCR and India's position in relation to refugees. These Pan-African bodies did not have the know-how, resources or imagination to speak to and for all their very diverse constituencies. As their members hailed from very different parts of Africa, they also lacked a homogenous socio-cultural agenda, which made it difficult to organise outreach activities and define modes of interaction with the Indian host communities (universities, welfare organisations and business networks) in which they were invested.

The growing Pan-African character of the diaspora and the lack of a Pan-African network coincided with the growth in numbers of the RCCG's African adherents in Mumbai. Initially supported largely by its Nigerian clientele, the RCCG began to attract non-Nigerians and Africans from non-Christian backgrounds, who joined church networks, first as uninitiated members, later transitioning into 'believers.' In the mid-2010s, the church networks counted amongst the faithful people, Sudanese, Gambians, and Nigerians (who were formerly Muslim), South Sudanese and Zimbabweans.

For many African 'Born Agains,' the process involved not only a spiritual journey, but the weakening of their original ethnic, religious, and national identities, easing the transformation into diasporic subjects. In some cases, their journeys are about both personal realignment with the RCCG's religious agenda as well as a search for an African diaspora, as in the case of Mohammed, a 35-year old from Sudan:

I am from Sudan, and I am registered with the UNHCR as a refugee. There aren't many people from my country who are here to stay. I used to be a Muslim – though I cannot say I practiced strictly. A Kenyan brother in India introduced me to the RCCG. I have found brothers and sisters from Africa, who are very much like me. Us Africans are similar – we like community, faith and God. Here we have a community. The church has supported me through hard times when I did not have money or was awaiting paperwork on my case in India (Mohammed, Sudan).⁴³

⁴³ Fieldwork, Interview conducted May 2019.

For Amina, a 36-year old from The Gambia, the church provides a space for negotiation of a diasporic identity for her family:

I am Gambian, married to an Indian for five years and I have two children. I used to be a Muslim in The Gambia. I prayed five times a day, I fasted at Ramadan and observed. I married my former classmate, a Hindu. As we need our children to grow up with Africans and know about Africa, I initially came to the RCCG for friends and support. Now I am Born Again. It is a better spiritual environment for us and our children (Amina, Gambia).⁴⁴

For Donald, a Nigerian student in India, his membership of the RCCG is linked to his understandings of his position as a Christian subject:

I came here as a student 5 years ago. I was a Catholic in my youth in Nigeria. In my time in India, I have achieved two degrees. I have worked hard to sustain myself, doing part-time jobs and working for other people from this church – Nigerians, Zimbabweans, and Sudanese – to help them do business. I gradually became Born Again. I am about to marry an Indian girl, from this church. I have worked for the RCCG, in the choir and as an administrator for these years. God must have brought me here to realise hardship, grow personally and for me to be a messenger for the church (Donald, Nigeria).⁴⁵

Ola, a Nigerian businessman has been able to sustain an export business in India from support networks configured through the church:

I come to India for 180 days every year. I was a student here ten years ago, and I made many good contacts in the clothing business. I import cloth (fine silks, cotton and printed fabric) from Gujarat to Nigeria. But I can only be here for 180 days at a time. So my church family look after the running of the business when I am not here, and continue buying things for me (Ola, Nigeria).⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Fieldwork, Interview conducted April 2019.

⁴⁵ Fieldwork, Interview conducted April 2019.

⁴⁶ Fieldwork, Interview conducted April 2019

The genesis of the African community in Mumbai is often represented by church elders and congregants within the context of the ‘Babel to Pentecost’ metaphor. From the situational Babel, of speaking ‘different tongues,’ Africans have been united in their search for ‘Pentecost,’ to ‘speaking in tongues’ and emerging as a community with similar characteristics, aims, goals, agendas and attitudes. The character of the diaspora in the 2000s is likened to an era which bore the characteristic of the Tower of Babel, with different interest groups, nationalities and religious groups all vying to claim space and forge a diasporic culture for themselves. With the acceptance of the predominance of the church and the necessity of being Born Again to signify an acceptable form of Africanness, a ‘Pentecost’ moment was achieved in the mid-2010s, homogenising the moral agenda and subjectivities of members of the diaspora, and cementing certain common characteristics in terms of economic and social aspirations. Indeed, the international networks of the RCCG have also allowed Africans to cooperate in social and business arenas. Sudanese have been able to employ the entrepreneurial services of Nigerian students in Mumbai; Nigerian businessmen have been able to find a market in Zimbabwe through Zimbabwean friends in the church; itinerant businessmen have been able to find partners to administer their businesses while they are away; and people of a number of different African nationalities have been able to establish social circuits and networks for themselves and their children.

THE PROMISED PEOPLE

RCCG elders, leaders and members in India refer to themselves as the Promised People, ‘promised’ the kingdom of God. Their personal journeys – from Nigeria, Kenya, South Sudan to India – are likened to the Israelites wanderings, full of physical and mental hardship as described in Num. 13: 1-25. Stories of hard-working Nigerian students seeking to better themselves by availing themselves of education; South Sudanese fleeing war; Sudanese escaping political turmoil; and Zimbabweans moving out of the realm of economic distress are often represented as being synonymous with the Biblical wanderings of the Israelites.

The journey of the founder of the RCCG, Rev. Josiah, to establishing the church in Nigeria is likened to the covenant (Berith) God made with the children of Israel.

God, like He did with Abraham, established a covenant with Rev. J. O. Akindayomi to the effect that He would meet the needs if [sic, of] the church in awesome way, if only members of the church would serve him faithfully and be obedient to his Word. It is upon this covenant that the Redeemed Christian Church of God was built.⁴⁷

Josiah's multi-layered spiritual journey began as a devotee of Ogun, the traditional Yoruba deity of war and fire; he was also a practicing *babalawo* (traditional diviner).⁴⁸ He was converted by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to Christianity in 1920, and affiliated to the Cherubim and Seraphim (C&S) mission in the 1930s, part of the burgeoning Aladura wave sweeping through Nigeria,⁴⁹ before he founded the RCCG. It was while Josiah was on the journey from his Ondo home to Ile-Ife that he was said to have entered into a pact with God, akin to Abraham's wanderings at the behest of God as described in Gen 12:1.⁵⁰

The covenant between God and Josiah is described as the 'Mount Sinai encounter,' at which 'God gave the laws that would govern the new church to Rev. Josiah.' As the covenant established a new people, so it also established a 'new order' which carried a vision of the enlargement of the church's activities and presence throughout the world.⁵¹

RCCG members in India see themselves as the foundation of a new nation of the 'redeemed' analogous to the nation of Israel liberated from the bondage and slavery of Egypt, a 'promised people' protected by God. While 'Abraham's descendants [were promised] all the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates' (Gen 15: 18-21) (that is, the Promised Land), the 'nation' of the RCCG exists in a moral, intangible space. Theirs is a multiracial, multi-ethnic nation devoid of locality.

The RCCG's conception of the world is divided into believers (Hindi: *vishvasi*) or Christians, and non-believers (Hindi: *avishvasi*) or non-Christians, with sermons frequently highlighting the differences in the worldviews of both categories of people. The Abrahamic covenant, which would 'make of Abraham a great nation and bless Abraham and make his name great so that he will be a blessing, to bless those who bless him and curse him who curses him and all peoples on earth would be blessed through

⁴⁷ Ukah, "The Redeemed Christian Church," 42.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁹ Peel, *Aladura*.

⁵⁰ Ukah, "The Redeemed Christian Church," 40-1.

⁵¹ Ibid., 42.

Abraham' (Gen 12: 1-3) is applied to believers and non-believers, forewarning of their divulging divine destinies.

As God promised to 'make Abraham the father of many nations and of many descendants and give 'the whole land of Canaan' to his descendants' (Gen 17:9-14), so the RCCG's mission is to expand, counting among its faithful people of many nations, who would become the 'spiritual descendants' of Josiah.⁵² The church is the nucleus of a 'nation', the yeast that will enliven the rest of the world by spreading the word of God and preparing the world for the 'end time.'⁵³ The RCCG has been successful in uniting Africans because it provides an imagined history for these disparate groupings of people, a moral mission for the present, and a shared destiny for the future.

Rituals of the RCCG provide individuals the space for selectively remembering/reconstituting and forgetting aspects of personal and corporate histories. A fundamental practice of the Church is 'restitution,' which is understood not just as a journey of personal transformation on the individual level, but a corporate process, whereby a new Pan-African moral, religious and transnational subject is invented. Restitution is understood as an act greater than true repentance, or 'payment for what is damaged.'⁵⁴ The doctrine of restitution is based on the text of Exodus Chapter 22:

If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him. If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed for him; for he should make full restitution: if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the theft be certainly found in his hand alive, whether it be ox, or ass, or sheep; he shall restore double (Ex. 22:1-4).

The act and process of restitution (involving 'repentance' and 'sanctification' where the soul is cleansed) is undertaken by each member of the congregation before they are admitted to the RCCG. This could involve several lengthy rituals, from counselling to group praying sessions, meditation and finally Baptism (by the Holy Spirit, Trinity or water), which reconstitutes their new moral subjectivities. In the context of African

⁵² The reinvention and elevation of Josiah to a Prophet-like figure, who experienced a divine 'calling', has been a crucial exercise in the RCCG's search for legitimacy as it erupted onto the global stage under Adebayo in the 1980s. See: Premack, "Prophets, evangelists and missionaries," 221-38.

⁵³ Ukah, "The Redeemed Christian Church," 42.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

migrants to Mumbai, the process of becoming Born Again reconfigures socio-cultural identities of people with lives embedded in the local fabrics in Africa. Rituals of repentance and soul searching see congregants reconfigure, or completely overwrite, their moral subjectivities and aspects of their individual histories. Some leave behind polygamy and polygamous relationships that they have pursued in their home-countries and even India. Some others denounce previous occupations often involving semi-legal or illegal activities, reconfiguring themselves as ‘moral’ subjects before Godly law. Some leave behind their previous religious personas – as Muslims, nominal Christians, animists – to become Born Again Africans in India.

As a narrative about personal change, ‘Pentecostal transformation is indexical of a discontinuity’ with a negative past that converts are trying to leave behind – cumbersome kinship networks, lack of opportunity, and a localised religious imagination full of ancestral spirits that determine life chances.⁵⁵ Some scholars emphasise the importance of rupture in the transformation to Born Again personhoods, where negotiating a discontinuity with the traditional past and non-Christian relationships is an important component of self-representation.⁵⁶ However, African Pentecostals cannot literally make a complete break with a localised past.⁵⁷ Instead, Pentecostal transformation could be understood as an ethical framework that helps church members engage in a meaningful dialogue with social, economic, and geopolitical changes.⁵⁸ This transformation can only be understood through the ‘selective and situated ways in which rupture is realigned’ and in the manner in which ‘continuity with Christian identity is embodied and performed.’⁵⁹ Indeed, Pentecostalism’s promise of ‘transcendental certainty,’ in the midst of changing worldviews mediated by migration, is appealing to Born Agains.⁶⁰

CITY OF GOD

India is often likened to Rome or the ‘Eternal City [Civilization],’ which is on the verge of destruction because of: 1) attachment of science and technology; and 2) widespread paganism. In his 5th c. CE text, ‘City of God,’ Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo

⁵⁵ Girish Daswani, “Transformation and migration among members of a Pentecostal church in Ghana and London,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 40 (2010), 443.

⁵⁶ Birgit Meyer, “Make a complete break with the past: Memory and postcolonial modernity in Ghanaian Pentecostalist discourse,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 28, 3 (1998), 316-49; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

⁵⁷ Mathew Engeleke, “Past Pentecostalism: Notes on rupture, realignment, and everyday life in Pentecostal and African independent churches,” *Africa*, 80, 2 (2010), 177-99; Meyer, “Make a complete break,” 316-49.

⁵⁸ Daswani, “Transformation and migration,” 467.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 468.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 445.

argued that Rome's pagan culture and emphasis on pleasure and the present had caused its fall, and not Christianity, as was the influential narrative at the time. Augustine argued that Christians ought to be concerned not with earthly pursuits, but eternal truths, and the real Eternal City, the City of God (heaven).

The RCCG has a dualistic relationship with its host community and agents of the nation-state within which it operates. On the one hand, it publicly proclaims that 'All Christians are to obey the law of the country, obey the government and authority' (Peter 2:13-14; Rom 13:1-5; Eph. 6:1-3).⁶¹ On the other hand, it is deeply dismissive of the beliefs and lifestyles of the vast majority of its hosts, living under the spectre of paganism which, they believe, will ultimately lead to their destruction.

Africans have often experienced racism in India, negotiating their existence in 'liminal spaces' on account of inherent hostility and state surveillance.⁶² Many continue to face racism in the everyday at the hands of their Indian hosts – from access to housing and access to essential services to medical care and schooling. Some of the prejudices that their Indian hosts have built up against them – primitiveness, backwardness, and (curiously) being capable of cannibalism⁶³ – are embedded in the creation of their own moral (counter) subjectivities that help them negotiate their positions with reference to their hosts. Elders of the RCCG in India sometimes describe Africans as 'simple' people, living close to nature and God.

India often positions itself as a nation attached to its civilisational wisdom and ancient culture, where religion and science were compatible systems of thought.⁶⁴ The conflation between 'modern science' and Indic 'religion' has become more pronounced in the public sphere after the ascent of the Hindu political right in power, with their ideologues arguing that ancient India was scientifically advanced and capable of executing 'modern' feats of engineering, medical surgery and even space exploration.⁶⁵ India's

⁶¹ The Redeemed Christian Church of God: <http://rccg.org/who-we-are/our-beliefs/> [Accessed: 29 July 2019].

⁶² Renu Modi, "Migration, success and liminal spaces: A contemporary perspective on Africans in India," in *Mobility Between Africa, Asia and Latin America: Economic networks and cultural interactions*, eds. Ute Rosenthaler and Alessandro Jedlowski (London: Zed, 2017), 134-55; Renu Modi and Rhea D'Silva, "Liminal spaces: Racism against Africans in India," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41 (2016), 18-20;

⁶³ Abhishek Dey, "After mob attacks six Africans on cannibalism rumour, police say incident wasn't racist," *The Scroll* (28 Nov. 2018): <https://scroll.in/article/903352/after-mob-threatens-six-africans-on-cannibalism-rumours-delhi-police-say-incident-wasnt-racist> [Accessed: 29 July 2019].

⁶⁴ National Portal of India, "Science and Technology": <https://www.india.gov.in/topics/science-technology> [Accessed: 26 July 2019].

⁶⁵ Sanjay Kumar, "Hindu nationalists claim that ancient Indians had airplanes, stem cell technology, and the internet Science," *Science* (13 Feb. 2019): <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2019/02/hindu-nationalists-claim-ancient-indians-had-airplanes-stem-cell-technology-and> [Accessed: 26 July 2019].

current perception of itself as a nation that prides its scientific and technological advances occupy an ambivalent position in the RCCG's conception of their host nation. Indian scientific advancement, while not overtly blasphemous, is against the design of God. For instance, the fundamental of belief is that 'Healing without medicine is Biblical' (Matt. 4:23; Ps. 103:3),⁶⁶ and that 'The force behind this [sickness] is Satan' (Job 2:1-9; Luke 13:15; Acts 10:3),⁶⁷ is often quoted as being directly contradictory of their worldview of their hosts, who attach a premium on scientific and medical advancement.

India has long been imagined by West Africans as a spiritually potent, exotic land, rich in ritual resources. Mami Wata, a popular water spirit widely revered by *vodun* practitioners across West Africa, is iconoclastically modelled after an Indian woman, based on images of snake charmers and Indian goddesses that made their way to early colonial West Africa on postcards and calendars used by Indian business-people.⁶⁸ A number of Indian deities such as Shiva and Ganesh were incorporated into pantheons of West African *vodun* as early as the 1950s,⁶⁹ and local forms of worship have evolved through encounters with Indian imagery generated through Bollywood films, and consumer goods and artefacts traded between India and West Africa. These deities are revered in West Africa alongside local ancestors and nature divinities, under the umbrella term 'India spirits.' And, as the various waves of evangelical encounters with Christianity, from colonial times to the present, saw missionaries demonise African pre-Christian traditions as Satanic,⁷⁰ polytheistic India with its chaotic pantheon of multi-headed and multi-limbed deities, came to occupy a special place in the African Christian imagination. The attachment to paganism, or lesser deities in African parlance, is one which many African cultures are familiar with, and many African Christian worldviews have struggled to obliterate these smaller gods from their theological mindscapes. The Nigerian evangelist, Emmanuel Eni, wrote about his pre-Born-Again experience with 'spiritism,' which involved not only brushes with 'satanic' indigenous ritual agents in Nigeria, but also teleportation to an occult society in Delhi, followed by a visit to 'India Jungle.'⁷¹ Eni's description of India is riddled with accounts of drinking blood, headless people, and demonic birds, all of which draw from the dialogue between the African Christian

⁶⁶ The Redeemed Christian Church of God: <http://rccg.org/who-we-are/our-beliefs/> [Accessed: 29 July 2019].

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Shobana Shankar, *An Uneasy Embrace: India, Africa and the spectre of race* (London: Hurst, 2021); Henry John Drewal, "Performing the other: Mami Wata worship in Africa," *TDR*, 32, 2 (1988), 160-85.

⁶⁹ Dana Rush, "The idea of 'India' in West African Vodun art and thought," in *India in Africa, Africa in India: Indian Ocean Cosmopolitanisms*, ed. John Hawley (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 149-80.

⁷⁰ Meyer, "Make a complete break," 316-49; Meyer, *Translating the Devil*.

⁷¹ Emmanuel Eni, *Delivered from the Powers of Darkness* (Ibadan: Scriptures Union, 1987).

imaginary and non-Christian religious traditions in West Africa and beyond, rather than orientalist ‘western’ tropes of India. The Devil, or associated demonic forces drawn from a pagan worldview, are believed to be capable of sponsoring illness and mental instability, impeding the spiritual and moral progress of a person, and affecting economic fortunes and infertility. Therefore, the Devil has special potency in a realm like pagan India, being more powerful than it is in the Post-Christian cultures of the Global North. The focus on demonology – for cleansing, strength, and to reverse fortunes – acquires added potency in RCCG public spaces in India. The emboldening of the Devil in a pagan realm, requires them to be more committed than ever to their mission in India, which was not a circumstantial accident, but part of a divine script, an idea deeply intertwined with their subjectivities as Born Agains.

Members of the RCCG (and indeed other Pentecostal-Charismatic churches) describe the religious landscape in the West as a ‘valley of dry bones,’ reminiscent of the biblical valley of dry bones represented in Ezekiel 37. Church leaders also articulate the biblical conceptions of diaspora and the exigencies of ‘leaving’ and ‘return’ as recorded in Psalm 68.31: ‘Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.’ Adogame observes that the hermeneutics involved in these passages gives religious legitimacy, empowerment, and hope to the sojourners.⁷² Most members of new African religious communities do not see emigration, and in particular to the Global North and India, as an end in itself. They believe that this painstaking decision was reached through divine design and not by accident. Their presence in external geographies is the result of a divine initiative whereby the ‘oppressed’ and the ‘downtrodden’ of the world (African evangelists and Born Agains) are charged with a mission to the cultured despisers of the faith elsewhere.⁷³ Attaining material blessings and success as per the Prosperity Gospel, which teaches that the rich and successful are wealthy because of faith, and the poor because of a lack thereof, in a new landscape in India, is therefore intimately linked to their moral, evangelical agenda in relation to their host society.

⁷² Adogame, “Raising champions,” 17-34.

⁷³ Claudia Währisch-Oblau, *The Missionary Self-Perception of Pentecostal/Charismatic Church Leaders from the Global South in Europe: Bringing back the gospel*, Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies Series 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2012); Ezekiel Olagoke, “Pan Africanism and the new diaspora: African Christians in the United States” (Unpublished PhD diss.: University of Denver and Iliff School of Theology, 2002).

CONCLUSION

In the academic literature on the African diaspora in Europe and North America, churches similar to this one are viewed as bringing an effective compensatory religious status to black minority groups, providing them with a moral code, and a community environment to support them in alien surroundings.⁷⁴ Elsewhere in different national matrixes (for example, in China), it is argued that while offering African migrants familiarity, moral support, and a framework, these churches also reinforce the distrust created by everyday experiences of disempowerment among the migrants, disrupting the potential of African migrant Pentecostal Christianity as an essentially progressive and integrative force.⁷⁵ I argue that the Indian experience stands in-between these two scenarios. Firstly, these churches provide space for diverse groups of Africans to converge – various homogenising processes are at play within the frameworks of the RCCG, which leads to the formation of a corporate African identity, imbued with a sense of purpose linked with a moral mission which entails both transformations at the individual level, as well as within the community of African evangelicals, and broader non-Christian societal sphere. National identities and ethnic differences are erased, subsumed by a creation of a Christian African subjectivity, where race and ‘blackness’ play a central role. (There are virtually no non-black Africans among these congregations – very few live in India for extended periods of time – and no Africans of Indian origin, who exist in spaces and networks away from those offered by African Pentecostal settings).

Secondly, the RCCG and other African churches in Mumbai have also emerged as an interface through which Africans engage with their Indian hosts. Unlike in similar hostile national spaces – such as in China – where registered foreign religious bodies are required to adhere to the stipulation that memberships must be entirely foreign, African Pentecostal churches in India are unique because of the significant numbers of local Indian congregants they have begun to attract.⁷⁶ Pentecostalism in India has traditionally been analysed as an ideology that appeals to mainly subaltern sections of society, with the promise of rewriting their own marginal histories, dictated by socio-economic status, caste and limits to aspiration.⁷⁷ Pentecostalism with its promise of egalitarianism, has long been

⁷⁴ Daswani, “Transformation and migration,” 461.

⁷⁵ Heidi Østbø Haugen, “African Pentecostal migrants in China: Marginalization and the alternative geography of a mission theology,” *African Studies Review*, 56 (2013), 83.

⁷⁶ Many African churches, such as the RCCG and Christ’s Embassy, have Indian pastors conduct services in local languages such as Hindi and Marathi, and attract large numbers in the range of 200 congregants.

⁷⁷ Michael Burgender, *The South Indian Pentecostal Movement in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008).

linked with struggles for visibility and influence in India on part of such subaltern groups, making the act of conversion itself, a political statement against prevailing hierarchies in the Indian context. In recent years, Indian Pentecostalism has begun to attract memberships from social, economic and caste groups with which it was not traditionally associated, a phenomenon which has not merited attention in itself. The presence of African Pentecostals has led to a merger of African and Indian Pentecostal liturgies, theologies and practices. Contemporary African Pentecostal preachers and prophets, who visit from Nigeria and other parts of the continent, are successful in attracting the attention and admiration of Indian Pentecostals, who perceive African religious agents, and Christian ones in particular, as more spiritually adept, authentic and genuine than their European or Indian counterparts.⁷⁸ Indian Pentecostals look upon African Pentecostals as kindred subaltern subjects, who are subjected to marginalised positions on account of global economic and social structures. Nevertheless, African Pentecostals are perceived as pious messengers of Christendom, imbued with a genuineness and authenticity which has been lost in the post-Christian ‘West,’ on account of technological and societal ‘progress.’ Churches such as the RCCG, therefore, function as spaces for a number of conversations between subaltern groups, both marginalised African sojourners, and Indian converts of disparate social backgrounds, erasing distance between migrants and hosts, functioning as an integrative rather than disruptive force.

⁷⁸ This is not surprising given the history of African itinerant preachers in the Indian religious imagination for centuries, through other religious frameworks. Considered to be spiritually better endowed on account of their exotic nature, many African ‘Siddi’ Sufi saints have been revered and continued to be revered in India. See: Helene Basu, “Redefining boundaries: Twenty years at the Shrine of Bava Gor,” in *Sidis and Scholars – Essays on African India*, eds. Edward A. Alpers and Amy Catlin (Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2004), 62-85.