CHAPTER 3

Re-Imagining the Religious Field: The Rhetoric of Nigerian Pentecostal Pastors in South Africa

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I came to South Africa in a difficult and mysterious way; God sent me as a missionary to bring a better life to our suffering brothers and sisters in South Africa. Since I came here in 2005, God has confirmed [...] that he sent me with a message of power, authority, healing, salvation and miracles. [...] A woman with HIV/AIDS was healed in my church; another [who was] barren for 7 years, just had a baby. These are confirmations that God sent me as a missionary to this land that has suffered so much.

BISHOP CHRIS (A Nigerian church founder-owner in Yeoville, Johannesburg, 2009)

I used to attend a Nigerian church at Berea. I attended for about a year and really enjoyed the lively music and choruses. I stopped because of too many demands for money. [...] It surprises us [South Africans] that after two months a pastor that just arrived here will buy a big car and will be living an extra-ordinarily flashy lifestyle. [...] They should make our lives better; instead, they are taking away the little we have.

JOHN (A South African ex-member of a Nigerian church, Hillbrow, Johannesburg, 2011)

Introduction

One of the increasingly visible exports of Nigeria in the 21st century is religion, specifically a brand of evangelicalism sometimes called Pentecostal/charismatic Christianity. With well over a million Nigerian nationals (both documented and undocumented) living in South Africa in 2014, the Nigerian diaspora in post-apartheid South Africa represents a significant proportion of the overall immigrant population in the country. A remarkable feature of the Nigerian community in South Africa—as is the case elsewhere in Europe and North America—is the ease and resolve with which its members establish

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1 Names of interview partners have been changed to maintain anonymity.
their own worship communities, strongly asserting their religious sensibilities and dynamics as well as at the same time altering the socio-religious ecology of the host society. In mid-2014, there were well over 600 Pentecostal-charismatic formations and ministries—as some are called—founded and headed by Nigerians in South Africa, 70 percent of which were concentrated in Johannesburg. Using Bourdieu’s concept of the field—with its obvious limitations as highlighted in chapter 1 of this volume—and data from an ongoing research project involving interviews with more than fifty Nigerian church founder-leaders, this chapter examines the rhetoric of legitimacy and arguments which these church founders deploy in justifying their presence in South Africa as deliberate, even if pragmatic, attempts to reimagining and redefining the local religious field and ecology.

The presence of Nigerian migrants in South Africa, which is now almost socially inescapable, meets with a variety of reactions and responses from host South Africans as well as other African migrants. The religious ecology of post-apartheid South Africa is dramatically changing in response to the presence and activities of migrant communities. One sphere in which Nigerian nationals in South Africa are increasingly asserting their presence—and which local reactions are equally becoming strong and vehement—is within the emergent local religious marketplace. Religious institutions, founded and headed by Nigerian migrants, have achieved social visibility, generating mixed reactions from different sectors of the host society. For the Nigerian diaspora community in South Africa—as well as elsewhere—religion is a core element in identity formation and self-representation. Wherever they emigrate to, Nigerians are in the business of establishing churches and para-church organizations. Anecdotal evidence indicates that it is more likely for a Nigerian than a Ghanaian or a Cameroonian or even a South African to establish a church outside their country of origin. All over Western Europe and North America, Nigerian-founded/owned churches have achieved social visibility and academic attention (Ugba 2009; Ludwig & Asamoah-Gyadu 2011). For African migrants in general and for Nigerian migrants in particular, religion is an important institution of identity politics, social negotiation and economic resource. The practical and pragmatic role of religion in African migrant life resonates strongly with the view of the British sociologist Bryan Turner (2011a: 103) who writes that, “diasporic communities are typically held together by their religious beliefs and practices in such a way that in modern societies the distinction between ethnicity and religion begins to become irrelevant”. As religion has become a strong and important structure of identity politics for Nigerian migrants in South Africa, so also it has become a site of contestation with South Africans. While some South Africans express awe and excitement about the religious and economic energy of many Nigerians living in their midst, others react with