

## Ambivalent belonging

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BRILL

# Ambivalent Belonging: Born-Again Christians between Africa and Europe

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## Abstract

Historically entangled with nation, race, and religion, questions of belonging are pressing and affective ones in Africa and Europe. Against the backdrop of anti-migrant hostility, globalization, and autochthonous claims, I consider how born-again Christians in London negotiate belonging between Kenya, their country of origin, and the United Kingdom, their country of residence. As ‘migrants’ and ‘diasporans’, they are seen as not belonging in either national context. Adopting a scalar approach, I argue that their identification as born-again Christians and claim to membership in a global Christian community allows them to ‘scale-jump’ and offers a morally and emotionally meaningful sense of belonging. At the same time, their encounters with various racial and religious Others locally, nationally, and transnationally mediate where they feel at ‘home’. In the face of contradictions and ambivalence, Pentecostalism helps them to navigate competing symbolic, material, and affective concerns as they seek belonging across multiple sociospatial scales.

## Keywords

belonging – Pentecostalism – Born-again Christianity – Kenya – United Kingdom – scale

In discussions of belonging, migrants are often seen as a problem, the act of migrating having deprived them of seemingly natural bases of identity, affiliation, and community rooted in locality, ethnicity, or nation. In both Africa and Europe political and popular discourses on belonging, as well as much

academic research, have focused on political dimensions of belonging, particularly rights to power and resources, and questions of citizenship. Political and economic liberalisation across Africa from the late 1980s onward coincided with increasing claims of autochthony and the emergence of exclusionist politics (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005; Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2001). In Cameroon, for example, claims of autochthony – of being if not ‘native’ to an area, at least of being ‘somewhere before someone else’ – have undermined the national in favour of the ethnic, whereas autochthony in the Ivory Coast has worked more in concert with national aims (Ceuppens and Geschiere 2005). Meanwhile, in Europe the opening of national economies to greater economic competition and labour mobility through globalization coincided with the emergence of ‘Fortress Europe’, a ‘new Europe ... internally open, but increasingly closed to the outside world’, a situation that has only grown more pronounced in the intervening decades (Gordon 1991, 121). Claims of autochthony continue to be understood in national terms, aimed as they have been at restricting access to citizenship and social welfare systems by limiting claims migrants make regarding (national) belonging. At the same time, far-right political parties in the United Kingdom, France, Denmark, and Hungary, to name a few countries, have made political and popular inroads, focusing their ire and anxiety at religious (non-Christian) and racial Others, (im)migration, and multiculturalism generally (Grillo 2007; Vertovec and Wessendorf 2010; Loch 2014). In doing so, their agendas reveal implicit assumptions about how nation, race, and religion coalesce in Europe.

Born-again African Christians in Europe pose particular challenges to these premises of belonging. They are not only migrants but are racially different from the majority; nonetheless, they are religiously familiar, though they are often not readily perceived as such. The Pentecostal Christians among whom I work in London migrated from Kenya to the United Kingdom during the 1990s and early 2000s. In their late teens and early twenties at the time of migration, they moved to pursue their aspirations for social adulthood in the face of a crisis of social reproduction in Kenya. Yet the act of migration transformed them into racialized migrants who are increasingly seen as not belonging to British society, regardless of their legal status and citizenship. In Kenya they are ‘Kenyans in diaspora’, a label about which they are ambivalent and that generates envy and resentment among nondiasporan Kenyans. These born-again Christians are ambivalent about their belonging in both contexts: they sympathize with nativist views that they do not ‘belong’ in the United Kingdom, and with the views of those in Kenya who see them as not quite belonging there either.

Much research on African diasporas in Europe and within Africa has focused on churches and mosques as spaces that mediate migrant belonging in contexts of arrival (Adogame and Weisskoppel 2005; Adogame 2009).<sup>1</sup> Whether among Ghanaian Methodists (Fumanti 2010) and Nigerian Pentecostals (Burgess 2011; Coleman and Maier 2013) in London, Zimbabwean Catholics in Birmingham (Pasura 2012), Ghanaian Pentecostals in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and London (Van Dijk 1997, 2004; Krause 2008, 2011; Daswani 2015), or Muslims from Guinea-Bissau living in Portugal (Johnson 2006) and from Senegal residing in Spain (Heil 2020), churches and mosques are central to the socioreligious lives of believers. They serve as sites where migrants can cultivate themselves as 'virtuous' citizens, which is especially important for those who are undocumented (Fumanti 2010). Similarly, these religious institutions in African diasporas in Africa are spaces where migrants, including West African Muslims in Congo-Brazzaville (Whitehouse 2012) and Nigerian and Congolese Pentecostals in Johannesburg (Landau 2009; Kankonde 2018), coalesce as communities of belonging, in juxtaposition to Christian and national majorities respectively.

This paper approaches belonging as relationally constituted between Kenya and the United Kingdom, between Africa and its diasporas, where born-again Christians' interactions and Others' imaginings of them mediate their sense of belonging; phrased differently, belonging entails processes of 'self-making' and of 'being made' by power (Ong 1996). Kenyan Pentecostals' identification as born-again Christians and affiliation with other Pentecostals offers a morally and emotionally meaningful community of belonging, which is socially intelligible across space. Importantly, I am not suggesting a functionalist or instrumental reading of their religiosity, but rather encouraging an understanding of their Pentecostal identification and affiliation within the social, cultural, political, and economic environments in which they gain wider plausibility. My focus is on the subjective experiences of these born-again Christians, particularly how Christianity helps them negotiate a sense of belonging vis-à-vis the places they live and those they encounter over the course of their lives, rather than on their political rights or the mediating role of the Pentecostal churches they attend. Doing so not only reveals the limits of citizenship for resolving questions of belonging when encountering Others, but also the limits of the cosmopolitan ethos that the Pentecostal churches they attend espouse. At the same time, it highlights the enduring symbolic power of the nation as a basis of belonging, which these Christians struggle to claim.

The notion of scale is analytically helpful here. A term borrowed from human geography, 'scale' is understood as referring to how 'social relations

are embedded within a hierarchical scaffolding of nested territorial units stretching from the global, the supranational, and the national downwards to the regional, the metropolitan, the urban, the local, and the body' (Brenner 2005, 9); it also refers to the interscalar networks that crosscut these hierarchically ordered levels, all of which are socially constructed (Brenner 2001). I am interested in how people implicitly identify at and with different scales, and how they engage in rescaling in their efforts to forge a sense of belonging (van Dijk 2011). If the 'global and local are the two faces of the same movement' (Hall 1992, 27), then Pentecostalism enables these born-again Christians to navigate between multiple scales as they make their lives between Kenya and the United Kingdom. A scalar approach illuminates how Pentecostalism facilitates their emplacement in London at the lived scale of the city (Fesenmyer 2019) and substantiates their claim to belong to Britain as a historically Christian nation. Meanwhile, their religious identification aligns them nationally with Christian Kenya, transcending claims of local belonging that would be hard for them to assert after more than two decades of living abroad. Most importantly, as Christians they claim membership in a global community of believers and the far-flung networks it represents; this affiliation not only disregards congregational and church boundaries, but also transcends the particular places where they live (Coleman 2000; Corten and Marshall-Frantani 2001; Martin 2002; Englund 2003). In other words, this self-conscious global religious identification is central to how they traverse continents and forge a sense of belonging.

The article begins by considering questions of belonging in Kenya and the United Kingdom historically and the ways in which they entwine with race and religion. I then look at three sets of social, symbolic, and ideational relations, shaping these born-again Christians' sense of belonging: their Pentecostal community in London, their encounters with wider British society, and their experiences in Kenya since migrating. In doing so, I trace the emergent disjunctions between the symbolic and material bases of belonging, paying attention to how their confrontations with particular lived realities reveal contradictions and generate ambivalence, ultimately mediating their sense of belonging. While reflecting life and interactions at different scales, the discussion also reveals how events and imaginings that occur or exist at one scale shape perceptions and encounters at another. The paper is based on sixteen months of ethnographic research conducted primarily in two Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches and among their congregants in East London between 2014 and 2016, while also drawing on my long-term engagement since 2009 with transnational families whose members live in London, Nairobi, and Kiambu, Kenya. Fieldwork included regularly attending weekly services; participating in church and fellowship meetings, events, and activities; attending

periodic large-scale religious conferences in London; and spending time with congregants and their families outside of church.

## 1 Belonging in Kenya and in the United Kingdom

Questions of belonging are pressing and affective ones, salient in Africa, Europe, and elsewhere. Writing about Kenya, John Lonsdale remarks that, ‘all claims to “belong” are situational’, responsive to threats and opportunity, and contingent on history (2008, 306). Central to livelihoods and lives, land was a prime site in the struggle for control during the colonial era (Berman and Lonsdale 1992), while the creation of African ‘reserves’ contributed to the mapping of ethnicity onto the land.<sup>2</sup> The interlinking of ethnicity, land, and belonging endured after independence, with land only growing in importance as a social, economic, and political asset. The introduction of multiparty elections in Kenya in 1992 triggered ethnic tensions, violent clashes, and displacement, which continue to mar elections (Kamungi 2009).

During the tumultuous 1990s those coming of age, a cohort that includes my interlocutors in London, faced social, political, and economic uncertainty. Declining GDP and the suspension of bilateral aid wreaked havoc on the economy. These conditions eroded what had become familiar pathways for personal and social development – education and employment. Consequently, this generation struggled to attain adulthood by securing livelihoods, establishing households, marrying, and starting families (Frederiksen 2000; Prince 2006). With economic opportunities limited and concerns about the future looming, families of all social classes felt increasingly compelled to try to send members abroad to ensure basic survival, escape brutal attacks, and meet aspirations for education and accumulation.

Issues of class and residence, which crosscut ethnicity, are also implicated in discussions of belonging. Due to its importance to the British colonial enterprise, Kiambu, a historically Kikuyu-speaking area adjacent to the capital where many of my interlocutors were raised, including John and Esther<sup>3</sup> who will be introduced later, experienced successive waves of labour out-migration, displacement, and overcrowding in the so-called ‘African reserves’ (Berman and Lonsdale 1992). This history, along with the customary preference for large families, meant that families often did not have enough land to accommodate all those who could make claims to it. Based on fieldwork in the 1970s, David Parkin (1978) recounts that many Kikuyu families moved to Nairobi such that the capital consisted of wealthier and poorer urban Kikuyu households, often with tenuous ties to their natal homes. Meanwhile, increasing urbanization

in the decades following independence also contributed to Nairobi's changing population (Oucho 2007). Those seeking work as lecturers, civil servants, nurses, or administrators in Nairobi gave rise to a new middle class (Stichter 1988). In addition to coming from Kiambu villages and towns, those I met in London such as Abigail moved from their parents' households in middle- and working-class estates in Nairobi, including Kasarani, Langata, and Riruta. Most of those living in London did not have houses of their own in Kenya; the handful with access to familial land upcountry were mostly from middle-class Luhya or Luo families, such as Robert, reflecting historical patterns of migration between western Kenya and urban areas (Parkin 1978; Cohen and Odhiambo 1989). These exceptions notwithstanding, ownership of land prior to migration was thus limited not only because of the uneven legacy of colonialism, but also because of migrants' life stage at the time of migration and their family's class background.

Questions of belonging in Kenya also play out along racial and religious lines. Following independence, Asian Kenyans, many of whose ancestors migrated there from the Indian subcontinent as British subjects during the colonial era, faced possible deportation like their contemporaries in Uganda (Cable 1969). More recently, concerns about Asian Kenyans arose in the wake of the 'Goldenberg scandal', a fraudulent scheme involving high-ranking members of then-president Moi's government, which is estimated to have cost Kenya the equivalent of 10 percent of its GDP and in which Asian businessmen played key roles (Branch 2011). Similarly, concerns about the place of white Kenyans in Kenya periodically recur. Though 50,000 of them left following independence, between 3,000 and 5,000 white Kenyans remain there and continue to be at the centre of disputes due to their vast land holdings (McIntosh 2016). Although not racially different from the majority of Kenyans, the loyalties of migrant Kenyans can be seen as suspect in ways not unlike those of racial Others.

In addition to its multiethnic and -racial character, Kenyan society is multi-religious as well. Christianity is clearly the dominant religion, with 82.6 percent, or 31.9 million people, identifying as Christians in the 2009 Census; however, out of a population of 88.6 million people, Kenya also has 4.3 million Muslims, 650,000 'traditionalists', and 53,000 Hindus (Kenya's Minister of State for Planning National Development and Vision 2030 2010).<sup>4</sup> Alongside historic mission churches, neo-Pentecostal churches have mushroomed throughout the country, especially in urban areas, since the 1980s (Parsitau 2007; Gifford 2009). With their ideologically exclusionary tendencies, these churches have been integral to the 'charismatization and Pentecostalisation' of Christianity in Kenya more generally (Parsitau 2007: 83; Gez and Droz 2015; Deacon 2015).

In this context, religious minorities face various forms of marginalisation and discrimination. Despite their long history in the country, Muslims have struggled to be considered 'Kenyan'. In the early 1990s they were still required to provide additional documentary evidence of citizenship. Whereas Christian applicants only needed two birth certificates, their own and that of one of their parents, applicants with Islamic names also had to provide the birth certificate of one grandparent. (Mazrui 1993); Kenyan Somalis, who are typically Muslim, continue to face difficulties regarding issues of citizenship and belonging (Scharrer 2018). Later that decade and escalating in recent years, a series of violent incidents, understood through the idiom of religion, have exacerbated Christian-Muslim relations.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, these tragic events have coincided with the so-called global war on terror and the rise of Al-Shabaab, a Somalia-based Islamist organisation with links to Al-Qaeda, such that Kenya's religious dynamics have globalized dimensions.

Just as in Kenya, questions of belonging in the United Kingdom are multilayered and complex. Early waves of migration from the Commonwealth to Britain, such as, student mobility, were viewed as temporary, albeit also important to the future of the Commonwealth and its relationship to Britain. Following the end of the Second World War people from the Caribbean, the 'Windrush generation', migrated to help rebuild the country (Phillips and Phillips 1998), as did British subjects from South Asia (Eade 1989; Werbner 1990). While Africans have long lived in Britain, particularly as the British Empire in Africa grew (Killingray 1994), greater numbers of West Africans migrated following independence in the region. The African diaspora continued to expand in the wake of regional and global financial crises in the 1970s and with the introduction of structural adjustment programmes in subsequent decades in sub-Saharan Africa.

It was not until the 1990s that the historical pattern of circular migration between Kenya and the United Kingdom gave way to one of outward migration from Kenya. Although not specific to migration to the United Kingdom, the numbers of Kenyans migrating abroad more than tripled over the course of that decade.<sup>6</sup> Their arrival coincided with two trends in the United Kingdom consequential for belonging: first, the tightening of the immigration regime aimed at limiting the ability of migrants to regularise their status and secure permanent residency; and second, the growth and diversification of migrant populations in London and Britain generally (Shah 2000; Vertovec 2007). My interlocutors migrated on a range of temporary visas as students, visitors, and holidaymakers, with many eventually obtaining permanent residency through one of two 'long-residence' routes.<sup>7</sup> While most of the people I worked with



were either permanent residents or British citizens by the time of my fieldwork, some have been unable to regularise their status and remain undocumented, which inevitably has legal and symbolic implications for belonging.

Those arriving in London in the 1990s and 2000s found a diversifying capital city (GLA 2005) where debates about belonging have only intensified. Many settled in the East London boroughs of Newham, and Barking and Dagenham. Home to the London Docks, Newham is a historic site of arrival where ethnic minorities are the majority (Aston-Mansfield 2014). In summer 2014 Newham was one area of London where the Home Office introduced Operation Skybreaker, a programme aimed at detaining and deporting undocumented migrants. White Immigration Enforcement vans were a regular sight in the borough throughout fieldwork. Their presence reflects how national immigration policy was made manifest locally in the parts of London where my interlocutors lived, worked, and/or worshipped. In contrast, Barking and Dagenham was a white working-class borough for much of the twentieth century. However, in the 2000s its white population declined while its Black African and, more broadly, its foreign-born population grew (The Migration Observatory 2013). During this period of arrival and settlement those with long-standing familial and social ties asserted their rights based on length of residence, whereas a discourse of need and concomitant responsibility served as the basis of the British state's reasoning for aiding more recent arrivals, especially refugees and asylum seekers (Keith 2008). These differing bases for asserting rights generated irreconcilable claims to belong in East London.

Over the last three decades the country has witnessed a decline in Christian affiliation, along with an increase in people with religious affiliations other than Christian, as well as a rise in the number of people who identify as nonreligious (British Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life 2015). Notably though, between 2005 and 2012 Evangelical churches showed a 30 percent increase, accounting for just over half of all churchgoers in London; Black-majority churches (Pentecostal) account for much of this growth (Brierley 2013). Coinciding with these shifts has been an Islamic revival, part of a religious movement globally in which Islamic schools, training centres, institutes, and bookshops have proliferated (Liberatore 2017). Concerns about social cohesion, national identity, and multiculturalism in Britain have also increased during this period (Cantle, et al. 2001; Local Government Authority 2002). Although much current popular concern focuses on Muslims, discussions about who belongs include not only racialized migrant Others but also white Eastern Europeans whose numbers increased following the enlargement of the European Union in 2004. Since the referendum on Britain's membership in the European Union in 2016 in which British people voted to leave the

supranational body, these discussions also arguably extend to all Europeans living in the United Kingdom.

Aspects of this changing socioreligious landscape often featured in church services and casual conversations. They served as both a basis of critique of the current state of Britain and a motivation for these Christians' self-betterment activities and their evangelising efforts. More broadly, these shared histories and contexts inflect their imaginings as well as those of who they encounter, and shape their subjective identifications and interactions with Others, whether in London or Kenya.

## 2 Born-Again Christians: A Moral Community of Belonging

Upon arrival in the United Kingdom these migrants did not find a 'Kenyan community' to join, unlike many of their migrant contemporaries from other African countries and despite the long history of circular migration between Kenya and Britain. Instead of ethnic-, national-, or place-based diaspora organisations or home(town) associations in London, Kenyan-initiated Pentecostal churches predominate there. In 2014 there were seventeen such churches in Greater London, with most having been founded from the early 2000s onward. Their founding reflects the postmigration conversion of many migrant Kenyans to Pentecostalism from the mission churches of their parents (Fesenmyer 2018). They did not find the Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist churches of their upbringings welcoming in London, nor did they feel that those services spoke to their lives and preoccupations (Adogame 2009). These independent and largely small churches contribute to the diversity of the African Christian landscape in London (Fesenmyer 2019), in which West African-initiated churches, particularly the Nigerian-initiated Redeemed Christian Church of God with its large transnational network of churches (Burgess 2009, 2011), dominate, along with megachurches such as Kingsway Internal Christian Centre (Garbin 2013).<sup>8</sup>

The Pentecostal churches they established are centres of religious and social life that hold weekly services, organise Bible studies, and host gender- and age-specific fellowship groups. They are essential to the marking of significant lifecycle events, ranging from baby-naming ceremonies and weddings to memorial services. While most members were born in Kenya, many congregations include members from various national backgrounds, including Tanzania, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, Jamaica, and the United Kingdom. Young families predominate, though many churches have some older members. While most are Kikuyu-speaking Kenyans, there are also non-Kikuyu Kenyans in the congregations. Rather than identifying the churches

as 'Kenyan', much less 'Kikuyu', pastors and members refer to them as 'multi-cultural' and the membership as 'international' (Fesenmyer 2019; Krause 2011).

Services and organized church activities speak to believers' entwined aspirations for spiritual growth and social mobility. Although most members explain that they migrated to 'better themselves' through work and study, it has not been easy for most to do so. The expense of studying meant that they needed to work alongside their studies, which delayed their efforts to gain their qualifications, if not derailed their plans altogether. Some sought work immediately, with many employed in low-wage, low-status occupations as cleaners, carers, security guards, and shop clerks. Others followed vocational paths and became electricians and plumbers, while still others trained as nurses and teachers.

Pastors attempt to address their congregants' worries and the challenges they encounter. Members are encouraged to see their difficulties as tests of their faith, which can in turn become the bases of future testimonies about the work that God is doing in their lives. While they do not overtly preach prosperity, pastors convey the belief that wealth and physical health are theirs for the taking. Aware of the barriers their members continue to face in pursuing their aspirations, they try to encourage them to engage in growthful activities that will allow them to fulfil their potential as God's children. Some churches, particularly the larger ones, host educational seminars about entrepreneurship and further or higher education, with the aim of helping members identify and develop their unique, God-given gifts. The churches offer a ready-made market for products and services of born-again Christian entrepreneurs and businesspeople, such as celebratory cakes for special occasions, event photography, website design, financial planning, and mortgage brokering. They also provide valuable networks for information sharing, camaraderie, and moral support, along with globe-spanning links to born-again Christians elsewhere in the United Kingdom and Europe, as well as North America, Kenya, and other parts of Africa.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis on Christianity as the basis of identity and belonging as opposed to ethnicity, nationality, or shared continental heritage, is evident in their views of their children and the kind of young people churches seek to cultivate through their child- and youth-focused services and activities. I had been regularly attending services at one church for five months when Abigail, a Sunday school teacher with two adolescent daughters, took the stage. As part of a service dedicated to young people, she spoke pasabout the covenant that protects their children:

When you have a covenant, it's like a train ticket that you never have to pay for. What if you never had to pay for the train again? The queen pays for your ticket, and you have a paper that you show at the gate, and what

happens? The gate always opens. That's what a covenant does in your life. It makes you untouchable. These kids are untouchable.... Having the favour of God means that our kids' ethnic background doesn't matter. Skin colour doesn't matter. God's favour ensures they don't matter.

In a subsequent conversation with me the pastor developed Abigail's point: 'We don't want to raise our children to be Kenyans, Africans, or Kikuyu; our ambition is for them to be able to succeed anywhere in the world'. This worldly cosmopolitan attitude reflects the Pentecostal belief that, as God's children, they have a right to the blessings of health and wealth won by Christ.

More than that, this self-understanding is an example of 'scale jumping' (Smith 1992): rather than identifying ethnically or at the scale of the national or even the continental, it emphasises their supranational or transcendent identity as Christians, an identification viewed as being intelligible at every scale. Notably, however, many parents have sent their children to boarding schools outside London, a practice also common in Kenya. They see these schools as offering better educations and more extracurricular and social networking opportunities than the lower-performing local schools in East London. Just as importantly, parents believe these schools' locations outside London reduce their children's exposure to gangs and street violence, which are a constant source of worry. In this way they tacitly acknowledge that the covenant that Abigail spoke of is not all powerful and their children are not immune to the everyday realities of racism or the consequences of social deprivation. In other words, there are limits to what scale jumping means in practice.

Like all the churches where I have spent time, the service was conducted in English.<sup>10</sup> Using English is part of their effort to act on the biblical command to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28: 16–20). Additionally, children in these churches, most of whom were born in London, only speak English. Their monolingualism has practical as well as symbolic and affective implications for belonging. For example, some grandchildren cannot communicate easily with their grandparents, whether over the telephone or during visits to Kenya. Given the cultural importance attached to grandparent-grandchild relations in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa (Radcliffe-Brown 1940), being unable to communicate is emotionally painful.

Among Kikuyu-speaking families like Abigail's this reality is poignant, given the traditional idea that grandchildren are their grandparents reborn (Kershaw 1973). Following Kikuyu custom, Abigail and her husband named their first-born daughter after her paternal grandmother and the second born after her maternal grandmother (Herzog 1971). Although both parents grew up speaking Kikuyu and Swahili, they have only taught their daughters English. Abigail explained, 'We didn't think about it when they were born, what language they

should speak. They live here [in London], and we wanted it to be easy, like at school'. On their first visit to Kenya (Nairobi and Kiambu) with their daughters, however, they saw the impact of their children's monolingualism when their own parents struggled to understand their accents, and the girls could not easily play with their cousins. Abigail said, 'We tried for a while, when we came back, to speak Kikuyu to them, but it didn't last'. An inability to communicate arguably attenuates the children's connection to kin and, by extension, to their parents' place of origin.<sup>11</sup> The experiences of Abigail's family highlight the disjunctions between the symbolic and everyday in questions of belonging, between identifying with a 'higher' scale and their lived experiences in particular local settings.

### 3 Racialized Migrants in the United Kingdom

If church services and activities help to constitute this inclusive Pentecostal community that is at once local and global, then their experiences as migrants do so negatively through experiences of exclusion. For these born-again Christians the act of migration transformed them into migrants whereby they became subject to national migration controls linked to their nationality as Kenyans. These in turn determined the terms of their residence and settlement in Britain, including the length of their stay in the country and their right to work, vote, and access state support. They also became a racialized minority in a context where the historical entanglement of race and belonging positioned them at a sociopolitical disadvantage. With the changing sociodemographics of East London, anxiety about migrants, and competition over public resources, referred to earlier, it is perhaps not surprising that my interlocutors have had negative encounters with neighbours, co-workers, and strangers. The following encounters illustrate how national concerns and discourses interpenetrate the scales of the neighbourhood, workplace, and shop, and are in turn drawn on in making sense of everyday interactions while also mediating their claims to belong nationally. At the same time, they highlight how their relations with Others and the wider world beyond the church shape their identity as born-again Christians.

When I visited Esther, a married woman who works at a bank, at her terraced house in Barking, she explained that although she tried to stay out of politics, she thought Margaret Thatcher had been 'good' because she encouraged hard work and home ownership. Esther went on to describe the tense relationship she and her husband had with their white British neighbour. Unlike their neighbour who rents her house, they bought theirs, which was formerly social

housing. In Esther's view, her neighbour's unspoken assumption was that 'we must have been given [the house] because we're migrants'; in other words, as migrants they could not have afforded to buy it themselves without state assistance. Esther read the neighbourly tension through local and national discourses that have only become more hostile to (im)migrants. They bought the house in the mid-2000s at the height of growing tensions between long-time residents and recent arrivals over the distribution of such public goods in the borough. This period also marked the local electoral success of the far-right British National Party candidates in nearby Dagenham who campaigned on an anti-immigration platform. However, Esther did express some sympathy for her neighbour who had witnessed the borough change so much and so rapidly over the course of a decade. She recalled her own experience of returning to the Kiambu village of her childhood only to find that it had become almost unrecognizable with newly constructed blocks of flats covering what were once verdant, open fields.

Similar sentiments arose while talking with John, a married man who migrated in the mid-1990s as a student from another village in Kiambu. While John had hoped to become a lawyer in the United Kingdom, his educational path had been disrupted because of his need to work while pursuing his studies. He decided to forgo studying law and instead chose to train as a social worker, and eventually met and married his Kenyan-born wife who was training as a nurse. On a visit to their house in Dagenham, John shared a story with me about a white British co-worker with whom he carpooled as part of a larger conversation about people not realising 'how hard Africans [in Britain] work'. When it was John's week to drive, his colleague spent the ride talking about John's car, commenting on its power steering and leather seats, and fiddling with the power windows. Underlying the running commentary about his car, John felt, was an unasked question rooted in envious disbelief – how could an African migrant like him afford such a nice car? The two men had been hired around the same time to do the same job. However, John said he 'worked every available overtime shift', earning whatever extra money he could, while his colleague was 'satisfied with his contract hours and left at the end of the day'. Like Esther, John interpreted the incident in light of popular negative portrayals of African migrants. In his narrative he countered an image of being underserving and waiting for handouts with one of hard work and perseverance, reflecting his upwardly mobile Christian disposition and the Thatcherite ideals Esther mentioned.<sup>12</sup>

If some encounters with white British people have been difficult, those with Black British people have not been without incident or prejudice either, which denies race as a 'natural' basis of affinity.<sup>13</sup> For example, one woman shared

a story of how a fellow customer and Black woman in a shop accused her of having sold the woman's Jamaican ancestors into slavery. Having only recently arrived in London, she was taken aback at the lack of goodwill and camaraderie, not to mention ignorance (see also Johnson 2005). However, in other instances the misconceptions and prejudice came from my interlocutors, with several of them wondering aloud why Black Britons of Caribbean heritage were 'lazy', 'unambitious', and had no qualms about accepting public assistance (Fumanti 2010). Such comments draw new boundaries between the speakers who saw themselves as 'good' migrants who, like Esther and John, were hard-working, self-sufficient Christians, an image fostered in church services and cultivated through church-sponsored activities, and other 'bad', 'undeserving' non-Christian and nonreligious people, both migrants and citizens.

Thus despite the inclusive Christian claim that everyone is equal regardless of race and nationality, these born-again Christians engage in 'competitive autochthony' in London, asserting a greater right to belong than others (Anderson 2013, 44). Competitive autochthony here entails constructing a new social hierarchy based on having a Christian work ethic and thus being morally good as well as superior. In addition, the historical links between Kenya and the United Kingdom – namely, their shared history, my interlocutors' knowledge of British history from their schooling, and their fluency in English – buttressed their connections to Britain, unlike, for example, Eastern Europeans, who, although generally Christian, lack such cultural, linguistic, and historical links. In this way their claims to belong do not turn on questions of citizenship or the legal right to live in the United Kingdom. Instead, by aligning themselves with Britain's Christian heritage, they attempt to assert a sense of national belonging based on shared religiosity and history, often in the face of perceived hostility, thereby challenging their racialised exclusion.

Notably, at the same time they cultivate a self-image as cosmopolitans who can relate to people of diverse backgrounds, which, as I argue elsewhere, is integral to their notion of being modern and 'living as Londoners do' (Fesenmyer 2020, 411). The seeming contradiction between exclusionism and cosmopolitanism can be reconciled by way of their claims to belong and thus to the power that belonging affords – a power that in turn enables them to be tolerant of Others who live in their midst. Nonetheless, this reconciliation is not without its tensions and complications, not least of which is the reality that various Others do not readily accept their claims of belonging.

#### 4 'Kenyans in Diaspora'

Most of these born-again Christians have not lived in Kenya for over two decades. In many cases their visits have been infrequent not only because of work commitments and the cost of travel, but also due to their immigration and legal status in Britain, including the time and expense needed to regularise their status. Although this temporal and experiential distance mediates their sense of belonging, I suggest that their Pentecostal identification and religiosity facilitate their claims to belong vis-à-vis Kenya as an imagined Christian homeland. In doing so, however, further disjunctures between the symbolic and affective on one hand, and the material and lived on the other become apparent.

In relation to those who remain in Kenya, these born-again Christians refer to themselves as 'Kenyans in diaspora'.<sup>14</sup> It is an ambivalent social category, engendering in migrants a sense of pride while also being burdensome. The term 'Kenyans in diaspora' evokes positive imaginings of 'abroad'. Many politicians, business leaders, and other public figures in Kenya studied abroad such that living outside Kenya, specifically in Europe and North America, is closely linked to material success and higher social status. These in turn raise expectations of financial and other forms of assistance among those who remain in Kenya (Fesenmyer 2016). Yet 'abroad', understood as referring to so-called Western countries, also has distinctly negative connotations that taint the image of 'Kenyans in diaspora'. For example, the legality of divorce, homosexuality, and abortion in the United Kingdom, issues raised in church services, is seen as evidence of 'Satan having been allowed in' (Deacon and Lynch 2013) and of the country 'straying toward darkness'. Although being Christian is largely assumed in Kenya, these migrants assert their religiosity as a means of distancing themselves from such negative associations that come with living in Britain (Fesenmyer 2016).

Those who remain in Kenya view migrants with a mixture of envy and resentment because of the imagined opportunities to which they have access. One unanticipated but coveted opportunity that emerged over time was obtaining what was commonly referred to as a 'red passport'.<sup>15</sup> In 2010 Kenya passed a new constitution that resulted in a new Citizenship and Integration Act (2011) that allowed dual citizenship. Prior to that time Kenyans in the United Kingdom who wanted to become British citizens were legally required to relinquish their Kenyan passports. The denial of dual citizenship seemed entirely sensible to Geoffrey, the brother of Robert, one of my London-based interlocutors, and an entrepreneur in Nairobi. Geoffrey thought that if they left



Kenya during a period of difficulty migrants should lose their right to benefit from the country when it was doing better economically. They were already perceived as having superior access to opportunities and resources by virtue of being abroad, so why should they also be 'rewarded' for leaving? Migrants are more likely to be accused of disloyalty, rather than of having split loyalties like Asian and white Kenyans who are assumed to be, or at least assumed to have the right to be, dual nationals.

Notably, Robert also expressed concerns about dual citizenship in Kenya. Extrapolating from how he saw migration as having 'changed' Britain, he said, referring to Kenya: 'It might be OK at first, but in 20 years Kenya will be in the situation that the UK is now.... Look at Somalis,' he went on, 'they've bought up Eastleigh [a Nairobi estate], and Kenyans don't feel comfortable there anymore', referring to the forced migration and subsequent settlement of many Somalis in Nairobi following the collapse of Somalia in 1991. Asserting religion as the primary marker of belonging, Robert revealed his understanding of who belongs in both contexts, namely Christians like himself. Importantly, although denominational differences are salient in Kenya (Gez 2018) and Britain, not to mention integral to discussions about how to be a good Christian, being Christian, whether saved or not, mattered most to Robert. With that said, when speaking about Robert and his Kenyan-born wife having dual citizenship, both brothers were far less adamant. I knew from Robert that his wife and Geoffrey's wife wanted to start a business together; having a British passport would be advantageous for importing handcrafted goods from Kenya and for regular travel between the two countries. Neither brother thought it was right that prior to 2010 Robert's wife would have been forced to choose between Kenyan and British citizenship. Thus although not generally viewed as 'good' at the national scale for either Kenya or Britain, they saw dual citizenship as desirable for their own families.

While citizenship is salient to discussions of belonging regarding non-Black and non-Christian Kenyans – revealing competitive autochthony at work in Kenya – belonging in Kenya, as mentioned earlier, is more commonly understood in terms of land and ethnicity. Consequently, the fact that most born-again Christians in London do not own land there is significant and raises a key question for those who would like to acquire land – where should they do so? Many migrant Kenyans struggle with a tension between their perception of the continuing salience of ethnicity in Kenyan society and the cosmopolitan outlook they aspire to embody as Pentecostals. Returning to John, while his desire to become a particular kind of person motivated him to migrate, the material reality that his family's small land holdings in Kiambu, a legacy of the colonial era, were not sufficient to provide him with a livelihood or accommodate his own future family contributed to his migration.<sup>16</sup> When he reached the age of

40 in 2013, John and his wife began thinking about having a house in Kenya. Although neither had lived in Nairobi before, the city was appealing because of its modern amenities to which their London-born children were accustomed. However, the capital was expensive and, even more importantly, they did not see Nairobi as a 'proper' site for their home, a sentiment many shared, including those who had been raised there. In this way John and others feel the 'constraints of origin', that is, powerful imaginaries of loyalty that bind migrants to their ancestral homes (Chabal 2009, 63).

A few years ago John and his wife bought a plot of land near Ongata Rongai in Kaijiado County. On the periurban outskirts of Nairobi, Rongai has developed into a more affordable place to live for those working in Nairobi. Though nominally part of Maasailand, it is, unusually for Kenya, a multiethnic area with a sense of inclusiveness captured in the local English phrase 'being cosmo' (Landau 2015). Drawing a parallel with Rongai, John expressed appreciation that his lack of familial, ethnic, or historical ties to Dagenham had not prevented him from buying a house there, though it had not assured his family of a welcome reception from neighbours. Another desirable aspect of Rongai from John's perspective was that it is far enough away from Kiambu, roughly 35 kilometres, to ward against conflicts arising between his wife and his mother were they to live in Kenya. By keeping a distance from their in-laws, according to a logic espoused by Kenyan Pentecostal pastors, couples can better maintain their kin relations (Wangaruro and Wangaruro 2010; see also Fesenmyer 2016). This so-called benefit reveals the contradictions embedded in John's search for belonging in Kenya: he felt Nairobi was not a 'proper' site of belonging, yet there was not sufficient family land in his home area of Kiambu to accommodate his family; even if it could, living near his parents might cause friction between them and his wife. At this point the reality of living in Kenya again for John and his family remains hypothetical since he has only laid the foundation for a house and has no concrete plans for spending more time there.<sup>17</sup>

John's experience is one that his born-again migrant peers share: the desire to own land in Kenya and build a house there. For those of his generation from Kiambu in the Central Highlands land is particularly scarce, especially among those who do not come from prosperous backgrounds. His choice of Rongai can thus be read both as a practical one and one that speaks to his aspiring cosmopolitanism, given the area's multiethnic character. Pentecostal values and ideas can help to reconcile ethnic history and material constraints at the scale of the local, mitigating Chabal's 'constraints of origin', yet there are few Rongai's in Kenya (2009, 63). Moreover, their Christianity aligns them with Kenya as a Christian nation amid a perception of the growing presence of Islam there. In other words, they make claims to belong more than Asian, white, and Muslim Kenyans, but nonetheless feel their claims are more

tenuous than those of their Black Christian counterparts. Yet at the same time, their cosmopolitanism distinguishes them from so-called 'backward' Kenyans who cling to a 'tribal mentality', which they understand to be a major factor in holding Kenya back from fulfilling its God-given potential (Fesenmyer 2020).

## 5 Conclusion

Issues of belonging continue to be pressing and affective ones in Europe, Africa, and elsewhere. They are often understood in political terms focused on rights to power and resources such that who belongs and on what basis are fraught and contested questions. In the case of the born-again Christian migrants here, my analysis extends beyond the political realm and the legal bases of belonging to focus on subjective senses of belonging, and how the local, national, and transnational contexts in which these migrants live shape them. In doing so, we see that citizenship does not settle the question of who belongs, even as it continues to figure in their thinking. Rather, material, symbolic, and affective concerns in both Kenya and the United Kingdom mediate these born-again Christians' sense of belonging, creating the conditions of plausibility that make religious belonging compelling. The cosmopolitan outlook of Pentecostalism crosscuts ethnicity, nationality, race, and class whereby their claims of belonging rooted in religion subordinate race and migration status in the context of the United Kingdom and ethnicity in the context of Kenya. Moreover, their belief in being God's children encourages them to strive for the 'health and wealth', to which they understand themselves to be entitled. Claims to be part of the Kingdom of God, a supranational identification, thus operate in similar ways to autochthonous claims, that is, they advance people's access to opportunities and assert allegiances that link them to the wider world, thereby circumventing local and national constraints (Simone 2001). Attention to religion nuances our understanding of migrant identity and belonging where a focus on nationality, race, and ethnicity otherwise dominates.

Not only do particular contexts mediate belonging but social relations do as well. In becoming born-again or rededicating themselves to God following their migration, they sought to become particular kinds of persons, an ongoing process to which the churches and their fellow Christians are integral. At the same time, in settling in East London they have encountered diverse people who make them feel more or less welcome locally, more or less like they belong nationally. As a basis of affinity, their born-again Christianity serves as the starting point for engaging in competitive autochthony vis-à-vis other migrants, not to mention 'lazy' British people of any racial background. This hierarchising in turn creates new fault lines for belonging in Britain. They may strive to

act on the Christian belief that all people are equal, but the lived experience of diverse East London challenges the realization of that belief (Fesenmyer 2020). Similarly, religion serves as the primary basis for belonging in Kenya where, after years of living abroad, they are disconnected from daily life, but their affective ties remain powerful. Although Pentecostalism discursively calls for believers to 'break with the past' (Meyer 1998), my interlocutors remained concerned with how to navigate existing social worlds, especially their relations with kin in Kenya. Identifying with Kenya as a Christian nation helps them to reconnect, while serving as a boundary vis-à-vis non-Christian and non-Black Kenyans. By 'testing' them, their relations with an array of Others, including kin, help to constitute them as Christians and shape their community-making efforts. The transnational focus of this article reveals both the appeal and the limits of incorporation in a global Christendom.

Finally, being attuned to how senses of belonging may shift over the life course underscores the temporal dimensions of this primarily spatially focused discussion. These born-again Christians left Kenya with the aim of achieving social maturity. In becoming parents, they sought an emotionally and morally significant community of belonging in which to raise their children, which they created with other Christians in London. Like John, as they get older they will contemplate their retirement and whether to build a house in Kenya if they can afford to do so. They will also consider where they eventually want to be buried: will they want their bodies transported back to Kenya, or will they be buried in the United Kingdom? Central to the question of burial is who will tend their graves; the answer is in part contingent on where their children live, which is itself linked to citizenship, as well as their children's own social and affective ties.<sup>18</sup> Being born-again entails negotiating not only between past and present, Christian and non-Christian, but also between 'here' and 'there', despite their membership in a global Christian community (Coleman 2011). The ways in which their Christianness shapes their sense of belonging will continue to evolve over time and across space.

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## Notes

- 1 Another strand of research focuses on home(town) associations, which provide opportunities to contribute to the development of migrants' 'home' areas and participate politically (Lampert 2009; Page 2007), while offering a space to debate how to live in the diaspora (Mercer and Page 2010).
- 2 The term 'reserves' refers to areas established by the British colonial government throughout the colony to make the task of governing easier and facilitate the collection of taxes (Berman and Lonsdale 1992).
- 3 All names are pseudonyms. In a few selected instances other potentially identifying details, which do not have analytical relevance, have been altered to ensure anonymity.
- 4 John Lonsdale offers an educated 'guesstimate' that puts Christians at a lower level: 80 percent Christians, 7.3 percent Muslims, and 11.55 percent those who follow 'traditional' religious practices (2009: 63).
- 5 Incidents include the U.S. embassy bombing in Nairobi (1998), attacks on a beach hotel and airplane near Mombasa (2002), a mall bombing in Nairobi (2013), and an attack on university students in northern Kenya (2015), among others. For a discussion of Muslim-Christian relations in Kenya see, for example, Maina (2003) and Mwakimako (2007).
- 6 The number of international migrants rose from almost 163,000 in 1990 to more than 755,000 by the end of the decade. <http://esa.un.org/migration>. Accessed 30 September 2011.
- 7 The two routes allowed people to apply either after ten years of continuous lawful residence in the country or after fourteen years of 'continuous residence of any legality', which can include periods of being undocumented. In 2012 the fourteen-year route was extended to a twenty-year residency path (Home Office 2012).
- 8 In the early 2010s several churches were founded as branches of Kenya-based churches. Also, the Presbyterian Church of East Africa established a branch in London in 2006 to minister to Presbyterians in the diaspora.  
Some interlocutors have attended West African-initiated churches in London and continue to do so periodically depending on various factors, including their spiritual needs and a particular pastor's gifts, as well as pragmatic concerns like the timing of services, their work schedules, and proximity to a given church.
- 9 Krause and van Dijk argue that these global networks are part of a de-diasporization process in which belonging is linked to a hodological space 'consisting of connections, corridors, paths, lines, and linkages' rather than to particular places (2010, 99).
- 10 One church I know of held a monthly service in Kikuyu; and a Charismatic Baptist church had a regular Swahili service.
- 11 Language raises similar questions of belonging among educated urban Kenyans. Rachel Spronk (2009) discusses how her middle-class interlocutors are at once proud of their English fluency, viewing it as a sign of their cosmopolitanism, and ashamed, questioning if they are really 'Kenyan' or 'African' if they cannot speak Kikuyu or Dholuo.
- 12 While the parallels between Pentecostal and neoliberal subjectivities are notable (Comaroff 2009; Marshall 2009; Piot 2010), further discussion falls outside the scope of this article.
- 13 Notably, race and culture have been selectively attributed to migrants from the Caribbean and Asia in Britain. Benson pithily describes it as follows: 'Asians have culture, West Indians have problems' (1996: 47). Building on this, Alexander argues that African-Caribbeans have become the 'epitome of dangerous and desirable marginality, theoretical

- high fashion' (2002, 557). My interlocutors hold largely negative views of other Black Britons and seek to distinguish themselves from them on moral grounds.
- 14 It refers to Kenyans living in Europe and North America. Although Kenyans migrate within Africa and to the Middle East, China, and elsewhere, my sense is that those destinations have different social, if not also moral, valuations.
- 15 Prior to Brexit, British passports were red to match the passports of other European Union countries. However, the British government made the decision to issue navy blue passports following the vote to leave the EU.
- 16 John grew up in what was once an 'African reserve' in Kiambu. Reserves were often overcrowded, thus creating immediate and future problems of land scarcity. This was the case with John's family when he reached adulthood.
- 17 Migrant housebuilding is often a protracted affair largely because migrants tend to build houses with cash, as John intends to do, rather than bank loans, which requires the house to be built in stages as money becomes available.
- 18 There are notable parallels between debates about where to be buried among those in the diaspora on the one hand, and those who live in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa on the other (Cohen and Odhiambo 1992; Geschiere and Gugler 1998; Whyte 2005).