

# Language Practices as Religious Innovation: The Case of Pentecostal Charismatic Churches in Xenophobic Contexts

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## Abstract

In the authors' recent case-study research of migrant-dominated Pentecostal charismatic churches (PCCs) in the South African cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town, language emerged as a prominent feature of religious practice, suggesting a positive correlation between experiences of xenophobia and religious innovation. This perspective is developed through the identification and discussion of two interlinked themes that surfaced from a closer analysis of the findings: (1) belonging and diversity and (2) evangelization. These two themes are assessed through the prism of religious innovation.

## Keywords

Pentecostal charismatic churches, African migrants, South Africa, language practices, religious innovation, xenophobia

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Xenophobia, though not a uniquely South African phenomenon, profoundly characterizes present-day South African realities.<sup>1</sup> Theologians have argued that this reality ought to be acknowledged as an ecclesiological and missiological challenge for South African Christians.<sup>2</sup> Instead of emphasizing the agency of South African Christians and churches in combating the problem, we focus here on the potential of so-called migrant-dominated churches to reverse the missional direction and become transformative agents in South Africa's xenophobic contexts.<sup>3</sup>

This article presents part of the findings of a research project that explored the potential positive correlation between experiences of xenophobia and religious innovation in selected migrant-dominated Pentecostal charismatic churches (PCCs)<sup>4</sup> in Johannesburg and Cape Town.<sup>5</sup> Based on this exploration, we examine the use of language as a specific dimension of religious practice and the way it may be seen as a form of religious innovation in overcoming xenophobia. While this examination does not allow the unpacking of the xenophobic experiences shared by our interlocutors, we consciously interpret our data on language within the social context of our key interlocutors. They were black African migrants in South Africa, a key target of xenophobia.

## **Religious innovation**

In contemporary scholarship "religious innovation" is being adopted as a heuristic concept to capture the contribution of faith communities to positive social change in their immediate and larger social environments.<sup>6</sup> "Innovation" has become a preferred term because of the way it expresses "normative commitment to initiatives" that social agents "deem to constitute change for the better."<sup>7</sup> The term is seen to have an "agential, pragmatic, and contextual flavour," as it is normally understood as "a situated process of individual or collective creativity prompted by a specific problem or need."<sup>8</sup>

When shifting the conceptual focus from "innovation" to "religious innovation," it is helpful to distinguish "innovation in religion" from "religion in innovation." The former asks how innovation is being understood, experienced, and practiced within religious traditions and faith communities; the latter asks how religious traditions and faith communities contribute to innovation in society.<sup>9</sup> This distinction leads us to another one: "between innovation which aims to ensure the survival of the religious community (internal), and innovation which responds to the challenge of the broader community (external)."<sup>10</sup> Here we find a correlation, on the one hand, between innovation in religion and internal innovation, both of which may lead to an appreciation of support for individuals within a particular church, and, on the other, between religion in innovation and external innovation, both of which may lead to an appreciation of a particular church's influence on the wider community or society. Such distinctions allow us to identify a particular faith community that (1) may be appreciated for its contribution to innovation in religion and internal innovation but (2) may be found wanting in terms of its contribution to religion in innovation and external innovation.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the concept of "religious institutional entrepreneurs" has been introduced in the literature to study agency in religious innovation. More generally, "institutional entrepreneurs" are defined as "insiders from a particular institutional field" able to

“leverage their understanding and access to resources to develop alternative models of social arrangements to justify innovations.”<sup>12</sup> They strive primarily to legitimize “new and alternative forms.” Correspondingly, religious institutional entrepreneurs “accomplish such work within religious organizational fields.”<sup>13</sup> They do so, significantly, by collective action.<sup>14</sup>

## **Methodology and profile of research sites**

In the literature it is argued that religious innovation can be studied only “on a case-by-case basis” through empirical investigation.<sup>15</sup> Methodologically, we follow suit by using a multiple-case-study design in approaching the question of language as innovation in a xenophobic context. We draw insights from fieldwork conducted in five churches in order to “reveal complementary aspects of the phenomenon” and, where applicable, for “multiple cases to independently confirm emerging constructs and propositions.”<sup>16</sup>

The fieldwork, conducted between late 2018 and early 2020, involved two churches in Johannesburg and three in Cape Town. In Johannesburg we engaged with a branch of Heirs of Promises Sanctuary (HPS, Sanctuaire Héritiers des Promesses) and a parish of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), the first being Congolese-led and the latter Nigerian-led. In Cape Town our fieldwork focused on a Nigerian-led congregation of Omega Fire Ministries (OFM), a Congolese-led congregation of Every Nation Church (ENC), and a Zimbabwean-led church, Heaven on Earth International Ministry (HEIM).<sup>17</sup>

The Johannesburg fieldwork team, consisting of Elina Hankela and a research assistant, Clementine Nishimwe, conducted semistructured interviews with thirty-four people. The sample of interviewees was purposefully diverse, including pastors and members, women and men, and different national and cultural groups. The team also attended over a dozen events, mainly Sunday services, at each of the two churches, recording sermons and writing field notes. The data analysis was informed by certain principles from grounded theory and assisted by the use of ATLAS.ti.

In Cape Town a total of twenty interviews were conducted. Interviews involved both church leaders and lay Christians. At the start of the research, Henrietta Nyamnjoh and a research assistant, Daniella Abrahams, alternated between church services at OFM and HEIM and compared notes, highlighting the salient themes from the sermons. Church services at ENC were attended by Henrietta Nyamnjoh alone. In addition, the team attended two HEIM crusades, and Nyamnjoh belonged to various WhatsApp groups in the three churches. Critical discourse analysis was used as the method of data analysis.

## **Language practices in five migrant-dominated PCCs**

In all five churches a range of languages was spoken by the congregations and used in the services. Moreover, either French or English, or both, played an important role in communication within each church.

In the two Congolese-led churches (HPS and ENC), French played an important role in the life of the church. At HPS the main Sunday service was conducted in French and translated into English, and songs were sung in French, as well as indigenous African languages such as Lingala. The parish also ran an English-language service that was popular among the children of French-speaking migrants; besides English, the worship included, for instance, indigenous South African languages. The ENC service that the fieldwork team attended took place after the main English service and catered to the French-speaking members of the church. These services were conducted in French, with an English translator; over one hour was dedicated to praise and worship, using vibrant Congolese Christian Kwasa-Kwasa.<sup>18</sup>

In the other three parishes English was an important medium of communication. At OFM the service was conducted in English, but Pidgin English was used occasionally when the pastor wanted to drive home important points. While English was the main medium of communication at the RCCG parish, praise and worship featured West African rhythms and lyrics in Yoruba, isiZulu, and other languages. Finally, at HEIM the service was held in English and chiShona, with often poor English translations.

In the following subsections, we examine the language practices in these churches through two interlinked themes: (1) belonging and diversity and (2) evangelization. This approach allows us to see how language can advance religious innovation. The analysis builds on existing scholarship that argues, on the one hand, that Christianity plays, or has the potential to play, a role in fostering a sense of belonging in contexts marked by anti-immigrant sentiments<sup>19</sup> and, on the other, that a missionary identity may further facilitate integration in a foreign, unwelcoming context.<sup>20</sup>

### *Belonging and diversity*

While some interviewees did not feel at home or safe in South Africa at large,<sup>21</sup> viewing xenophobia as a threat, we observed praise and worship serving as a medium for creating a space to belong, not only for the majority nationality within a church but also for members from various countries, including South Africa. In response to the team's questions about the songs in different languages at HPS, interviewees spoke of language creating a sense of home. For instance, Chris,<sup>22</sup> who attended the French service, explained the use of different languages as aiming to intentionally "accommodate everyone": "It's to make everyone feel: I'm at home; this is my home." This comment resonated with the way in which members of RCCG reflected on singing at their church. Didier, for instance, related, "So today we'll play a song in Swahili, and the Swahili people they'll feel, 'Oh, we are part of this church as well.' Tomorrow you play a Tsonga song, and the Tsongas [will say], 'Oh, we are also part of this.'"

The above findings were further echoed in observations from OFM, where Nyamnjoh noticed that when a Nigerian, Cameroonian, Zimbabwean, Congolese, or South African song was sung in the service, the lead singer would be from that country. Songs in Pidgin English were led either by a Nigerian, a Cameroonian, or the pastor, whereas any of the choristers could lead an English song. Significantly, the Cape

Town team observed how people danced and ululated when a song was sung in their native language.

Additionally, parts of our data suggest that the diversity was embraced as a strength, which forms a stark contrast to the xenophobic mentality, which sees black African nonnationals in South Africa as culturally backward or their languages as barbaric.<sup>23</sup> Gloria, a Nigerian married to a Congolese and always animated in church whenever an Igbo or Lingala song was sung, explained: "There is only one God, and no matter what language in which the song is sung, it is meant to praise him and to lift us as Christians to him, because it is him we are celebrating and pouring out our hearts to!" Grace, the lone South African chorister at OFM, indicated that she had learned singing in different languages, as well as the cultures of the other choir members, and she felt privileged to be a member of the church: "It has taught me how to appreciate others." Conversely, Faith, a Nigerian worshipping at RCCG, explained how she loved South African songs and appreciated learning them as a member of the choir. Such comments suggest that through songs Christians may (inadvertently) downplay nationality in favor of their religious identity, rearranging new networks of allegiances within a broader environment affected by xenophobia.<sup>24</sup> This is not to say that we did not also hear about challenges related to the inclusion of songs in various languages.

On the whole, the language practices seemed to also play a role in enabling a sense of belonging in the larger society. Translating the services from French to English at HPS, for instance, may have had another primary aim, but it also provided a space to learn English: "They preach in French, and then they translate in English, so it helps me with French and English" (Esther). Though Louis noted that it was positive that preaching in French allowed people to understand the message, he questioned whether they were pushed enough to learn English: "Sometimes, I think, we are also not helping the members to improve their English. So people rather come here, even until now we are still interpreting. . . . People, if you live in a country, you should speak the language."

Taking our cue from what Esther said, we could see at RCCG and OFM, where songs sung in languages other than English were often translated into English on the TV screens in front of the church hall, that attenders had an opportunity to familiarize themselves with South African languages. Some choir members at RCCG mentioned how they were learning South African languages through practicing songs for the Sunday service. This is notable in the South African context, where language is used to identify African migrants; that is, not speaking a local language renders people vulnerable to xenophobia.<sup>25</sup> The sense of belonging within the church can extend through language practices into the public sphere, for these practices were to some extent facilitating a feeling of being at home in the society at large.

While not necessarily applying to all language-related choices, harnessing diversity and belonging through certain language-related choices was clearly intentional. This was epitomized by the OFM pastor's invitation to the congregation for more members to join the choir: "You must not only enjoy the music and dance to it, we need more choir members; we should be able to sing even in Yoruba and in French and storm heaven with our voices." Similarly, at the time of the fieldwork the RCCG parish

expressed a clear intention to prioritize songs in South African indigenous languages in praise and worship. And in the French service at HPS it was explained that live translation into English was aimed at “not excluding English-speaking people” (Pastor Paul). As becomes evident below, this intentionality was closely related to evangelization.

### *Evangelizing in South Africa*

At the heart of Pentecostal evangelism is winning souls for Jesus. All five case-study churches were committed to the dissemination of the gospel, and language constituted the vehicle through which the message was packaged and delivered to reach a wider audience. While South African public mentality was xenophobic in viewing migrants as posing “potential threats to national identity, social order and . . . the values cherished by the majority population,”<sup>26</sup> members of these churches were clear in expressing a sense of having a positive mission in South Africa.

The expressed task of evangelization underlines the point that inclusivity was not directed solely at migrant members but also at local Christians, with the use of indigenous languages motivated by the need to evangelize. For instance, in the interviews and sermons at RCCG, we frequently heard the idea of getting to heaven and taking others along through “preaching the gospel, . . . making disciples, and living a holy life according to the Bible,” as Obafemi phrased it. In line with this mission-mindedness, RCCG emphasized the importance of worshiping in South African indigenous languages, as noted above. Faith explained: “If we want South Africans to come to the church, if we want South Africans to listen to what’s the gospel we are preaching, we have to blend with them, we have to speak their language, we have to do things their way.” At OFM the pastor sometimes asked the Afrikaans-speaking Christians for a word in Afrikaans that explained what he was saying, or he would even ask one of the elderly women to explain his point in Afrikaans, so that the young people attending could understand exactly what he was driving at. He explained that the youths are fragile souls who must understand the message and that it is his duty to speak to this age group, because “I don’t want to sow the seed in the weeds or thorns.”

The same mission-mindedness was echoed in the way in which the pastors at ENC and HPS spoke of English in relation to taking the church to South Africans and bringing South Africans to the church. At both HPS and ENC the French service was translated into English. The Congolese-born pastor at ENC explicitly reminded his congregation that they were also open to those who do not speak or understand French, and Pastor David from HPS explained that when doing outreach in homes for the elderly, the preaching was done in English, “because . . . as we are in South Africa, we don’t only preach [to] French people, we can also preach [to] people from South Africa.”

Interestingly enough, the Lingala singing also attracted non-French Christians to ENC.<sup>27</sup> The praise and worship time was marked by dancing to Congolese gospel music. When Nyamnjoh asked a South African woman why she attended this French service instead of the earlier English service, the woman noted, among other things,

that she loves Congolese music, enjoys the singing, and finds the dancing therapeutic. However, what is important from the perspective of our discussion here is that she explained that she did not feel excluded, for there was a translator.

Overall, the call to spread the gospel informed the way in which our interlocutors reflected on language practices in the church, and the mission-mindedness—typical of Pentecostal Christians—encouraged the incorporation of South African languages into the life of the church. Here a particular theology of mission reinforces language practices that facilitate belonging among African migrants in South Africa, where knowing an indigenous language can protect one against xenophobic attitudes.

## **Language practices as religious innovation in xenophobic contexts**

Finally, we relate our discussion of the language practices discussed above to the notion of religious innovation in order to reflect on how those practices may be regarded as a form of religious innovation overcoming xenophobia in the urban centers of South Africa.

Our case-study discussion reveals how language practices in the selected churches were a vehicle in the process of migrant adaptation and the fostering of a sense of belonging. We contend that this is a case of internal religious innovation, with the sense of belonging being created in situations of multiple diversities. In contrast to xenophobia, which targets black Africans speaking “foreign” African languages, language practices in these churches stand at the center of a practical commitment to creatively foster diversity and inclusivity. This deliberate focus was coupled with a choice of not focusing explicitly on xenophobia as such in the services in these churches. Rather, energies were focused on the pull factors that the churches stand to benefit from by emphasizing unity in diversity. We may go further by also interpreting this deliberate commitment as an expression of religious institutional entrepreneurialism—a collective effort by the congregations to work for an alternative social arrangement, one that is dictated not by xenophobic sentiments but by a theological value orientation that embraces diversity, inclusivity, and unity. Our case-study discussion suggests that embracing this value orientation testifies strongly against the xenophobic stereotypes that black Africans from the rest of the continent do not want to master the languages of South Africa, are culturally backward, or are unwilling to associate themselves with the national identity and social order.

The normative religious belief of the importance of spreading the good news, which underpins the evangelization practices discussed above, opens up the possibility of harnessing unity in diversity among congregants and the general public alike. This forms a stark contrast to the xenophobic elements in the public culture. Regarding innovation as a concept with a normative underpinning, some of the language practices seem at first sight to be dictated simply by practical needs rather than normative values. Yet, when considered from the angle of evangelization, they are also clearly shaped by normative values. Such a normative standpoint could, of course, turn into an exclusionary enterprise embracing only those whose beliefs are like one’s own.

However, the emphases in the analysis specifically in relation to language practices suggest that, despite a clear evangelical thread in the theological fabric of these churches, the message of these churches involves the potential to foster “radical openness,” as Wariboko describes Pentecostalism.<sup>28</sup> At the level of language practices, the focus remains on including, not excluding, the other, which at times extends from the church context to public life and other interactions in society.

The dynamic between “innovation in religion” and “religion in innovation” allows us to think theoretically about the ways in which the innovative inclusionary language practices in the churches translate, or have the potential of translating, into innovation in society. Here, the practices that encourage a different way of being community can be framed as innovation in religion that has the potential to facilitate innovation in society more broadly through the church members. The language practices discussed in this article open a window onto a possible space in which diversity is celebrated, something that these African PCCs seem to be able to imagine and even to bring forth momentarily and temporarily.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, Jonathan Crush, Godfrey Tawodzera, Abel Chikanda, and Daniel Tevera, *Living with Xenophobia: Zimbabwean Informal Enterprise in South Africa* (Waterloo, ON: SAMP, 2017); Francis Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders: Citizenship and Xenophobia in Contemporary Southern Africa* (Dakar, Senegal: CODESRIA, 2006).
2. See, for example, Chammah J. Kaunda, “Enabling Liminality Prophetic Witness to Xenophobia: Proposing a Missiological Spirit Response for the Church in South Africa,” *KOERS—Bulletin for Christian Scholarship* 81, no. 1 (2016): 1–9; Jerry Pillay, “Racism and Xenophobia: The Role of the Church in South Africa,” in *Ecodomy—Life in Its Fullness* (= *Verbum et Ecclesia*, suppl. 1, 38, no. 3 [2017]: 3–17).
3. One exception from the literature that has reversed the missional direction is Vedaste Nzayabino, “The Role of Refugee-Established Churches in Integrating Forced Migrants: A Case Study of Word of Life Assembly in Yeoville, Johannesburg,” *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 66, no. 1 (2010): 1–9.
4. The Pentecostal and charismatic movement is often divided into distinctive subcategories in academic writing, such as classical Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism. Because the case-study churches in our research did not belong to only one such category, we choose to speak broadly of “Pentecostal charismatic churches.” See, for example, Maria Frahm-Arp, “History of Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity in South Africa,” in *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future*, vol. 3: *Africa*, ed. Vinson Synan, Amos Yong, and J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House Publishers, 2016), 263–84.
5. The project was conducted under the working title “Xenophobia and the Re-imagining of Evangelization amongst Migrant Dominated Churches in South Africa” (2018–20).



6. See, for example, Fondazione Bruno Kessler, Position Paper of the Center for Religious Studies (henceforth FBK-ISR Position Paper), *Religion and Innovation: Calibrating Research Approaches and Suggesting Strategies for a Fruitful Interaction* (Trent, Italy, 2019), <https://isr.fbk.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Position-Paper.pdf>; Francis B. Nyamnjoh and Joel A. Carpenter, "Introduction: Christianity and Social Change in Contemporary Africa," *Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and Its Diaspora* 5, no. 1 (2019): 2–14.
7. FBK-ISR Position Paper, *Religion and Innovation*, 13.
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, 7.
10. Stephan de Beer and R. Drew Smith, "Religious Innovation and Competition amidst Urban Social Change: Pretoria Case Study," *Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and Its Diaspora* 5, no. 1 (2019): 106.
11. See, for example, *ibid.*, 116–18.
12. Gerardo Martí, "New Concepts for New Dynamics: Generating Theory for the Study of Religious Innovation and Social Change," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 1 (2017): 8.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 12.
15. FBK-ISR Position Paper, *Religion and Innovation*, 14.
16. Filipe M. Santos and Kathleen M. Eisenhardt, "Multiple Case Study," in *The SAGE Encyclopaedia of Social Science Research Methods*, ed. Michael S. Lewis-Beck, Alan Bryman, and Tim Futing Liao (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2011), 685.
17. In the article these acronyms refer to the specific congregations or branches that we engaged with, not the churches as a whole.
18. A popular Congolese musical genre.
19. See, for example, Afe Adogame, "Reinventing Africa? The Negotiation of Ethnic Identities in the New African Religious Diaspora," in *Religion, Ethnicity, and Transnational Migration between West Africa and Europe*, ed. Stanisław Grodz and Gina G. Smith (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 12–36; Nzayabino, "The Role of Refugee-Established Churches in Integrating Forced Migrants"; Alessia Passarelli, "Beyond Welcoming the Strangers: Migrant Integration Processes among Protestant Churches in Ireland," in *Migrant Activism and Integration from Below in Ireland*, ed. Ronit Lentin and Elena Moreo (Dublin: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 140–58.
20. See, for example, Dominic Pasura, "Religious Transnationalism: The Case of Zimbabwean Catholics in Britain," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42, no. 1 (2012): 26–53.
21. We follow Nira Yuval-Davis (*The Politics of Belonging: Intersectional Contestations* [London: SAGE, 2011], 10) in defining "belonging" as feeling at home and safe.
22. Names used throughout are pseudonyms.
23. Nyamnjoh, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 39.
24. Cf. Adogame, "Reinventing Africa?"
25. See, for example, David Matsinhe, "Africa's Fear of Itself: The Ideology of *Makwerekwere* in South Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2011): 295–313.
26. Pillay, "Racism and Xenophobia," 9.
27. Singing in Lingala is very much steeped in Congolese Kwasa-Kwasa music culture.
28. Nimi Wariboko, *The Pentecostal Principle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 35.

## Author biographies



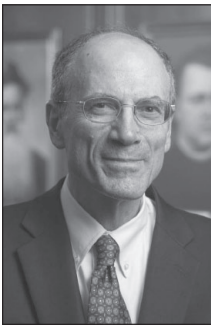
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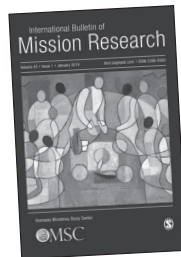


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