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Stuck in Kampala

Witchcraft Attacks, “Blocages” and Immobility in the Experience of Born-Again Congolese Refugees in Uganda

According to the estimates of the UNHCR, more than 40,000 Congolese refugees and asylum seekers were living in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, at the end of December 2017.¹ The vast majority of these refugees are from the Kivu region, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which borders Uganda, an area devastated by conflicts and violence for the past twenty years. The number of “urban refugees”—people who decide to leave the UNHCR camps and live in town—is rapidly increasing in Uganda as in other African contexts. Ugandan law recognizes refugees’ right to live anywhere in the country, to move freely and to work but, at the same time, it states that they do not receive any assistance outside the refugee camps. Moreover, as the period of “temporary protection” in Uganda is becoming longer and longer, many people are experiencing a “protracted refugee situation,” an expression that indicates refugees who have been waiting for resettlement for five years or more.

Refugees then find themselves “stuck” in Kampala, with little or no possibility of going back to their home country, and an unclear perspective about the future and the resettlement to a third country. This condition is often framed, especially by Congolese who belong to Pentecostal congregations, in terms of a “*blocage*,” an action of evil forces that blocks refugees, not allowing them to travel to Europe or to the US, the desired countries of destination.

Because of this lack of protection and assistance, and delays in the resettlement process, legal uncertainty and physical insecurity are two of the main characteristics that define the life of refugees in town. “Mistrust” is another keyword to describe their experience (Russell 2011); mistrust towards institutions (both Congolese, Ugandan and international), towards Ugandans,

1. <<http://data.unhcr.org/drc/country.php?id=229>>.

but also towards other Congolese and even relatives and friends, who are often suspected of being responsible for the physical and spiritual attacks against refugees and of using witchcraft in order to “block” them.

Given the extreme uncertainty as concerns both everyday life in Kampala and the future, religious language, especially references to witchcraft attacks and to deliverance, which are widespread in the Congolese *Églises de Réveil*,² becomes a resource for refugees in order to explain their experience and to situate it within a meaningful framework. The present article analyzes the way Pentecostal discourse is transformed to describe the condition of Congolese refugees in Kampala, to explain the uncertainty, the sense of being suspended in time and the different dimensions of waiting that are central to their experience of being refugees, as well as to make sense of the extreme degree of violence, trauma and suffering they encountered both in the DRC and in Uganda.

From this standpoint, the long period of waiting for resettlement to a third country assumes a different meaning. Although everyone knows that this process is strongly influenced by the particular features of each case and by the decisions of the officials at the Office of the Prime Ministry, which is in charge of the refugees’ dossiers, many among the Congolese refugees in Kampala refer to a condition of “*blocage*” caused by satanic forces or to the “will of God,” to explain why they have been waiting for so long and why other people who arrived in Uganda later have already been resettled. In the first case, as we will see, deliverance practices are the main instrument to “unblock” the individual and allow him to travel abroad; in the second, refugees compare their condition to that of the people of Israel whom, according to the Bible, spent a long time crossing the desert to reach the promised land. In both situations, however, obtaining a visa and being resettled are seen as a “miracle” that only God can perform (Daswani 2010).

The constant references to witchcraft, to the presence and action of demonic forces in Pentecostal language, thus allow Congolese refugees in Kampala to define their condition within the discourse of spiritual warfare and the struggle between Good and Evil. A real state of everyday experience of limited agency is thus translated from a political and institutional level to a spiritual one. In this view, “refugee” is not only a legal category, but also a spiritual one, that of a person or a group who is attacked and blocked by

2. “*Églises de Réveil*” (“Awakening Churches”) is a term that refers to a constellation of churches originating in Congo and in other French-speaking countries. These are Christian, Pentecostal-like churches, both independent and part of larger evangelical denominations, which call themselves *Églises de Réveil*, to distinguish themselves from mainline Protestant denominations. For the purpose of the present article, I will use “*Églises de Réveil*” and “Pentecostal churches” indifferently, as other scholars do (PYPE 2012; GARBIN 2014).

satanic forces. The opaque procedures of resettlement and the indeterminacy in the application process, both for the status of “refugee” and for travel to a third country, thus open up spaces for alternative narratives that refer to the presence of “occult bureaucracies” (Oosterbaan 2014), that is, of unclear bureaucratic practices that defy a rational explanation.

It is against this background that born-again Congolese refugees transform the Pentecostal idiom into a language of immobility, in contrast to a widespread tendency to use it to describe and characterize the high mobility and portability of Pentecostal beliefs and practices. As I will show, most of the Congolese churches in Kampala preach the need to be patient and to wait for one’s turn to travel, and to pray God for deliverance when the process is taking too long. This attitude is in sharp contrast to the common Pentecostal preaching to abandon the “victim” habitus and to represent themselves and act as victorious “warriors” (Maskens 2008: 56).

Based on fieldwork I conducted in 2013 (July-October) and 2014 (November-December), this article analyses the role of religion in a context of displacement, with specific focus on the presence of Congolese *Églises de Réveil* in the neighborhood of Katwe, one of the most populated areas of Kampala. After introducing the context, it first examines the concept of “*blocage*” more in depth to demonstrate the way in which it is used to make sense of the difficulties Congolese refugees experience in the process of resettlement. Second, it focuses on the role of religious language and beliefs in describing situations of mobility and of immobility, to then discuss the transformation of religious language when it comes to speaking of the refugees’ condition in terms of witchcraft, deliverance, and spiritual warfare.

The Context: Congolese *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala

Contrary to a widespread narrative that depicts refugees as people who depend on external aid to survive, an increasing number of Congolese decide to leave the refugee camps and move to town in search of better educational opportunities for their children, employment, and/or to escape the violence and the sense of physical insecurity they experience in the camps. If not security, Kampala offers, at least, a place to hide. Despite the extreme violence they experienced in Eastern Congo³ and the constraints encountered both

3. The security situation in North Kivu and Province Orientale in DRC had been worsening since 2012 when the July 2013 attack in Kamango town brought in an additional 66,000 refugees into Uganda, highlighting Uganda’s “generous asylum policy” as per the UNHCR (<<http://www.unhcr.org/528a0a268.pdf>>).

in leaving their home country and in Uganda, there is, however, room for decision-making, concerning where to live and with whom to associate while in Uganda (Clark-Kazak 2014).

With few exceptions, Congolese who live in Kampala do not plan to remain in Uganda or to go back to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC); instead, they are waiting for resettlement to a European or North American country. Yet, most of the people I met during my research complained about the excessive length and enigmatic opacity of these processes. Some of them have been living in Uganda for more than ten years, a situation where the concept itself of “transition” to another country becomes difficult to fathom and, somehow, even tragically ironic. Cases of this “protracted refugee situation” are increasing and a significant number of Congolese choose to move to Kampala to conduct a “normal life,” usually after spending some weeks or months in one of the refugee camps.

Officially, the UNHCR gives refugees three options: an assisted voluntary return to their home country; integration in the host country; or resettlement to a third country. For most of the Congolese refugees, none of these options is suitable, in reality. They cannot go back to the DRC because their houses have been burnt or destroyed, and they feel they could be attacked again; they are not able to integrate within the Ugandan society because of their condition as a minority with limited rights and a difficult access to job positions in the official market; and finally, they find themselves in a condition of prolonged suspension, waiting for a resettlement that in many cases seems to be impossible or, at least, a pipe dream more than an actual possibility.

In this situation, religious congregations, especially the Congolese *Églises de Réveil*, become a “refuge for refugees,” a space providing solace from everyday suffering and where one can share experiences and emotions with others (Gusman forthcoming).

Whereas during the colonial period the religious scenario in Congo was dominated by the presence of the Catholic Church, the explosion of the Charismatic renewal took place at the end of the Mobutu era, in the second half of the 1990s, with the growth of thousands of *Églises de Réveil* (Mossière 2010). Following a pattern similar to other African countries, it was during a period of acute uncertainty and intense political and economic instability that these churches grew at an increasing rate. Some of them are now well established, with several branches within the country and in diasporic contexts; Pentecostalism is today in a dominant position within the Congolese diasporic religious field (Garbin 2014). Some congregations originated in the DRC and opened new branches abroad following the paths of the Congolese diaspora (Demart 2008; Mottier 2012; Maskens 2014) whereas others were created

in diasporic contexts and sometimes established one or more branches in the DRC. While different and independent from one another, most of the *Églises de Réveil* present themselves as protagonists in the spiritual warfare and liberation of Congo from satanic forces held responsible for the continuous wars in the Kivu region.

Due to these conflicts, massive waves of forced displacement have taken place over the past twenty years and, currently, almost 600,000 Congolese refugees and asylum seekers live abroad. Uganda is, by and large, the country that hosts the majority of people fleeing the DRC, with more than 218,000 Congolese living in the country (data July 2017).⁴ Until 2009, their presence was regulated by the *Control of the Alien Refugee Act* (1964), which formally forced refugees to live in the camps, although some of them did not respect this obligation and illegally lived in Kampala or in other Ugandan towns (Kreibaum 2016). Following the new regulation of the *Refugee Bill* (2006, applied in 2009), refugees have the right to live outside the camps, yet, as mentioned, those who choose to stay in town do not receive any assistance from the local government or from the UNHCR.

Because of this situation, in this new context, Congolese refugees often build “kinship-like” relationships with people they have just met. Churches play an important role in this process: people stay together on the basis of a common faith, instead of a common lineage. Once they arrive in Kampala, Congolese look for relatives or friends to receive initial assistance and to find a place to sleep. When they do not know anyone in town, as it is often the case, they rely on the “protective networks” organized by religious organizations (Sommers 2001), which help them to settle in town by providing information on moving to and living in town and on how to obtain refugee status. The numerous *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala are often the first places where one can meet other Congolese and find not only a familiar idiom, but also the possibility of building new relationships based on “trust”.

Although Congolese refugees live in different areas of town, the highest density is found in Katwe, one of the largest and poorest neighborhoods of Kampala. Until the 1970s, this area was almost uninhabited and covered by swamps. Its growth has been due to the arrival of migrants, from the rural regions, and refugees, from neighboring countries, mainly from the DRC. Ugandans and Congolese living in Katwe have generally strained relationships, as most Ugandans do not accept the massive presence of refugees, and accuse Congolese of being responsible for the increase in rental prices in the area.

In September 2013, I mapped the presence of fourteen *Églises de Réveil* in Katwe, all of which had been founded after 2000, with the exception of

4. <<http://data.unhcr.org/drc/country.php?id=229>>.

one church. Considering the broader context of Kampala, in November 2014, there were fifty-five Congolese churches in town.⁵ However, this figure seems to be underestimated: according to the leader of the association, there were around 150 *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala alone.⁶

The size of these congregations is usually small, from thirty to approximately three hundred members, and fluctuating, as Congolese move frequently from one church to another. Church buildings are usually in simple and perishable materials, such as wood and metal sheeting. The congregations of these “refugee churches” reflect the Congolese population in Uganda, with a high number of children under the age of eighteen (around 30% of the total) and a similar proportion of men and women.

“*Blocages*” in Refugees’ Lives

The concept of “*blocage*” is part of the vocabulary of witchcraft in francophone Africa as it emphasizes the impossibility to improve in one’s life in different areas, such as health, wealth, love, and work. “*Blocages*” have a spiritual origin such that when they affect a born-again Christian, this indicates that, while baptized with the Holy Spirit, the person still has linkages with traditional spirits (Fancello 2008). This concept, together with other related terms—such as “*attachement*” and “*blindage*” or “*barrage*”—are widely used to indicate the effects of occult attacks and belong to both the Pentecostal and the Islamic vocabulary of witchcraft. Liliane Kuczynski (2008: 247) has shown that both in West Africa and in France people go to Islamic marabouts to understand the causes of these impasses in their lives. “*On a tout fait pour bloquer votre avenir*” is the reply of a marabout to the woman asking why she was unable to make any progress in her life.

In the context of Congolese *Églises de Réveil*, “*blocage*” describes different kinds of problems refugees experience in their everyday life. Examples include a student who used to do well at school and now is no longer able to obtain good results; a young girl who complains men run away from her; a man who is “blocked” in his search for a job; and a woman who recounts

5. The “*Communauté chrétienne congolaise en Ouganda*” was established in Kampala in 2010. The CCCU (Congolese Christian Community in Uganda) is a registered non-governmental organization (NGO) in Uganda; the only statistical source is the register log of the association itself (70 churches in 2014); 150 is the figure suggested by its leader to estimate the number of Congolese churches. Otherwise, in Kampala, there are more than 1,000 evangelical churches of different denominations.
6. Pastor Samuel, President of the Congolese Christian Community in Uganda, personal communication with A. Gusman, December 2014.

that her daughter was not able to give birth to her baby, although she was ten days beyond the due date.

Despite different meanings, among Congolese Pentecostals in Kampala “*blocage*” most often indicates a disproportionate delay in the process of resettlement—this long and often unjustified waiting period in Uganda—which is interpreted as the effect of demonic attacks against individuals, who are thus not able to obtain a visa to travel abroad. In addition to this, the term also denotes a situation of precariousness, one in which the person is neither able to move forward, nor to go back to his/her previous situation. For those refugees who are waiting in Kampala and have no clear resettlement perspective, “*blocage*” describes exactly the impossibility of both travel abroad and return to the DRC as well as the feeling of being stuck in Uganda.

Many people I met at the *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala believe their condition is at least, in part, due to witchcraft attacks. Some suspect that another refugee, often a close friend or a relative, went to see a witchdoctor in order to block their dossiers, thus preventing them from being resettled. As most of the refugees experience such problems with their dossiers at the Office of the Prime Ministry, it is not surprising that the quest to remove blockages is often central during prayers and deliverance sessions at church.

According to Congolese pastors, refugees are particularly vulnerable at the spiritual level due to their troubled past and the painful experiences they have in Kampala. For this reason, they are easily subject to witchcraft and evil spirits attacking them more frequently. As Pastor Jean-Louis said during a sermon at the *Église de Jesus-Christ*: “The Devil attacks you when you are in the dust, because you are more vulnerable.”⁷ This means refugees have to be even more intense and committed in their prayers to ward off or dispel evil spirits. According to the vision expressed in the Pentecostal revival faith in Uganda, well illustrated during church services, it is by relying on Jesus Christ alone and his unique power of deliverance that refugees can obtain protection from demons and remove the blockages from their lives, as in this excerpt from a sermon at All Saved Church: “If you are affected by the spirit of humiliation, your dossiers will be blocked and you won’t be able to travel abroad. Only God can set you free; don’t go looking for solutions elsewhere. These spirits who block your life are not leaving you because you ask them to leave or because you go to see a marabout. The Holy Spirit alone can chase them away.”⁸

7. “Le diable vous attaque quand vous êtes dans la poussière, parce que vous êtes plus vulnérables (Pastor Jean-Louis, *Église de Jesus-Christ*, Kampala, 6 October 2013).

8. “Si vous êtes affectés par l’esprit d’humiliation, vos dossiers seront bloqués et vous ne voyagerez jamais. Dieu seulement peut vous délivrer; n’allez pas chercher ailleurs

In the context of refuge, the Pentecostal language thus becomes an instrument to describe and explain uncertainty and immobility in refugees' lives.

Pentecostalism as an Idiom of Mobility and Immobility

In a well-known paragraph of *Tristes Tropiques*, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1974: 148) observed that “one has to be very naive or dishonest to imagine that men choose their beliefs independently of their situation.” If we have to try to understand how people choose their beliefs in a situation of displacement, there is not much literature to refer to despite the significant body of work that has explored the link between religion and migration.⁹ Indeed, the role of religion in contexts of displaced refugee populations has not been the emphasis of recent research. Refugee studies generally focus on livelihood strategies, economic and demographic aspects, leaving the religious side apart, as if it were residual. Moreover, the few existing studies usually analyze the role of churches and faith-based organizations (FBOS) as providers of social welfare, in circumstances where national states and international organizations fail to supply material help to refugees (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Lauterbach 2014). The specifically spiritual role of religion in this situation is seldom recognized, and when it is, it is usually analyzed in resettlement contexts, as in the case of Vietnamese refugees in Montreal (Dorais 2007) and in Berlin (Hüwelmeier 2014).

And yet, while it is undeniable that FBOS play such a role in displacement contexts where refugees rely on religious groups for material help and to establish new social networks, we need to take into account other dimensions of the interface between religion and displacement, considering the former both as a spiritual resource and interpretative framework aimed at making sense of a situation that is otherwise hardly understandable (Adogame 1998; Shoeb, Weinstein & Halpern 2007) and which has adopted a narrative and lexical field that specifically address the refugees' conditions.

From this point of view, it is not enough to stress the potential religion has to offer as a respite from the difficulties refugees encounter in their everyday life or as an aid to building a sense of community or “continuity in an otherwise troubled existence” (Dorais 2007: 65). Religious beliefs and discourses offer a perspective on the migratory process, both before the departure, while traveling

la solution. Ces esprits qui bloquent votre vie ne vous laissent pas parce que vous leur demandez de partir ou parce que vous allez voir un marabout. L'Esprit Saint seulement peut les chasser” (Pastor Samuel, All Saved Church, 20 December 2014).

9. For the Congolese case, see the work of E. WILD-WOOD (2008).

and after arrival in the host country. For many “would-be migrants,” religion is central to deciding if and when to leave the home country and a valuable resource to help face the difficulties of the journey. As Girish Daswani has shown in his analysis of Ghanaian migration, for born-again Christians, migration is more than just a livelihood strategy. Leaving one’s homeland under dire circumstances is in fact considered to be part of the covenant established with God. The Pentecostal ideology of the “Divine Plan” is key here in framing the migration process and in making sense of travel abroad (Daswani 2010: 457).

Some Pentecostal organizations are at the forefront in innovating their practices and discourses, focusing them around international migrations and have thus created series of migration-centered narratives which address the questions and anxieties of those who are planning, or are about to migrate (Dennis 2017). In the Ghanaian context, prayer camps have been dealing with migration as a spiritual problem at least since the 1990s as travel problems require specific prayers to remove spiritual barriers or blockages (Van Dijk 1997). The Pentecostal discourse describes mobility with a specific vocabulary that makes sense of the migrant’s experience (Bava 2011) by interpreting the migratory process as part of “God’s Plan” where moving to a foreign country is assumed as a “miracle” or a “mission” enabling the reborn believers to evangelize and spread the word of God.

Nonetheless, the flexibility of Pentecostal ideology makes it possible to adapt its language also as an idiom to interpret and express immobility, one that is useful to explain why Congolese refugees are stuck for so long in Uganda waiting for resettlement. With its emphasis on the Manichean struggle between Good and Evil, on deliverance and on the break with a sinful past, this powerful interpretative narrative defines not only the experience of mobility and migratory processes, but also of that of immobility and the impossibility of leaving a country to begin a new life elsewhere.

Among Congolese Pentecostal refugees in Kampala, references to witchcraft attacks and to “*blocages*” are frequent, in the attempts to explain the opaque procedures of resettlement and the “holding pattern” of “being stuck” in Uganda that many experience, as is the case of Pauline and Adèle,¹⁰ two women I met at Balume’s home.

Balume was a former Catholic who, in 2009, became a born-again and, in 2011, started his own Pentecostal ministry in Uvira, a small town near the border with Burundi. The next year, a group of rebels attacked the town and killed a pastor who was working with Balume at which time he decided to flee to Uganda, where at first he was hosted in a Congolese church in Katwe.

10. While the names of the pastors are real, all the others have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals concerned.

When we met in 2014, Balume had acquired—both among Congolese and Ugandans—a reputation in Katwe as a “man of God” who had the charisma to heal, to protect believers from witchcraft and to remove blockages. He did not have a church in town, but prayed and received people at home, mainly on Saturdays, “because during weekdays I need to go around to find a way to survive, me and my family; this ministry is not a job, I do it to help people who are in need.” After meeting twice, Balume invited me to his home for a prayer session. That Saturday morning he had to deal with three cases: a Ugandan woman who had a problem with her neck; a Congolese couple who had suffered two abortions; and Pauline and Adèle, two Congolese sisters whose dossiers were blocked at the Office of the Prime Ministry.

Balume explained to me the situation of the two women while they listened in silence, nodding at his words. Apparently, Pauline and Adèle had been called into the Office of the Prime Ministry six months before and told to prepare to leave for Norway in the next few weeks. When they had had no news for three months, they went back to the Office and were told that their process of resettlement had been delayed, with no further explanations. That was when they first went to Balume asking for his intervention; they prayed together and he told them there was a problem with the visa, and that the “*blocage*” was due to a woman whom they met at church: “This is because of jealousy,” Balume went on explaining:

Many people don’t want others to travel abroad, when they are still here. This is a big problem we have here in Uganda, instead of praying for friends, relatives and church fellows to be resettled, they go and see a sorcerer in order to block their dossiers. Sometimes they hope, in so doing, to get ahead of others and accelerate their own resettlement. In other cases, they just want to block other people; they think “If I can’t travel, then I don’t want you to travel, either.” And they are often close friends, relatives who are here or who remained in the DRC, people who pretend to be Christians. There is a lot of satanic culture in Congo; that is why there are so many *blocages* in our culture and in our country.¹¹

Two weeks before we met at Balume’s home, the two sisters had received the news that their visas were ready and, finally, they travelled to Norway the following week. According to the sisters, the “*blocage*” had been removed thanks to Balume’s prayers and yet, they were still afraid someone could block them again and were still in need of more prayers in order to complete successfully the process of their resettlement.

The case of Pauline and Adèle, and that of others I heard about at church and often in informal conversations, show the way Congolese Pentecostals in

11. Interview with Balume, Kampala, 12 December 2014.

Kampala read the difficulties in the bureaucratic procedures of resettlement in terms of satanic actions. It is not surprising that suspicion and witchcraft accusations are widespread, and that these are mostly directed at relatives and friends. As Peter Geschiere (2013: 14) has shown, intimacy breeds witchcraft, and witchcraft itself is the “flip side of kinship,” something that arises from the intimacy of family and home. In the case of Congolese refugees in Kampala, “homes” often no longer exist and familiar ties have collapsed. Thus, in this situation of social and moral breakdown, relatives and friends are suspected of having recourse to witchcraft in order to block the dossiers to prevent people from being resettled.

Spiritual Warfare and Moral Geographies: the DRC as a Devilish Space to Purify

The situation of “*blocage*” is not only restricted to the individual condition of refugees who are not able to leave Kampala but also has, in fact, a collective dimension. From the perspective of Congolese Pentecostals, it is the whole DRC that is being blocked. They interpret the history of their country as the story of a space under the control of satanic forces. This spiritual mapping explains the chaotic situation of the country and justifies the incessant use of deliverance to chase demons.

The recent history of the DRC is reinterpreted through a Pentecostal lens. From this point of view, the linkages many Congolese are supposed to have with “traditional spirits” are the cause of the wars and of everyday suffering. Spiritual warfare is thus both a struggle to make individuals free from demonic possession and a collective war to purify the Congolese social space from the presence of satanic forces.

The reference to spiritual warfare creates “moral geographies” (Shapiro 1994) in which the physical and spiritual spaces are divided up in a dichotomic and Manichean way in that places are either Christian or satanic. In this sense, spiritual warfare is a spatial practice, a war to conquer a specific space physically and spiritually (McAlister 2005). According to Congolese Pentecostals, the Kivu region in Eastern Congo is an obvious case of a territory that has been dominated by devilish, evil forces for a long time, which explains the frequent wars in the area and the suffering of its population. That is why most of the Congolese churches in Kampala have an “intercessors” group that prays for the deliverance of the DRC as, even if living abroad, the war cannot stop.

According to born-again Congolese, the violence in Kivu can be better understood with reference to the “traditional cultures” that have been influential

in the past and are still a strong presence in the region. As one pastor told me during an interview, “even among the members of the *Églises de Réveil*, many have still ties to the traditional spirits. This is idolatry, you know? A fake religion that mixes up God and the traditional spirits, the *mapepu*; how do you think it’s possible for God to act in a country where people do these kinds of things?” Pentecostal pastors ask people to bring their *fétiches* to church in order to destroy and burn them during spectacular deliverance sessions. In their view, it is only by permanently cutting the links with traditional culture and with the *mapepu* that the DRC and the Kivu region can be set free from the nefarious presence and actions of satanic forces, and that the wars will end. From this perspective, the question “why would God let all these bad things happen?” sounds like nonsense to Congolese Pentecostals because God is never the cause of suffering but, on the contrary, the only solution to it.

As a woman at All Saints Church told me:

There are people who say: “My husband and my children have been killed. Why has God let this happen?” But it’s not God who let it happen, it’s the Devil who caused it. In Congo, there are so many people who do not know God, and this was even more true in the past. It’s for this reason that we need to pray and pray again, and ask God to make us free from the spirits who attack us.

Similarly, it is only through God’s intervention that “*blocages*” can be removed and that Congolese refugees can leave Uganda and reach their “Promised Land” with the resettlement.

As it is becoming evident, the narrative of spiritual warfare and of deliverance widespread among Congolese Pentecostals is also a discourse about responsibilities both for the situation in the DRC and for the living conditions of urban refugees in Kampala. According to most of the Congolese I interviewed in Kampala, it is not easy to identify someone to blame for these situations; they are not able to identify an “oppressor,” and thus cannot retaliate.

Fidèle, a former student of theology at the University of Bukavu, explained this condition in terms that recall Paulo Freire’s “pedagogy of the oppressed” (Freire 1972). According to Fidèle, “as refugees here, we live waiting for a miracle; we are oppressed, we cannot do much to change our life. We are just here waiting, with no future and no hope.” Fidèle says he did not flee from Congo because he had been attacked; rather, he chose to leave Bukavu because some of his relatives were killed and he felt in danger. So at the beginning of his story as a refugee there is a more or less voluntary decision, that of leaving the DRC to reach a refugee camp in Western Uganda. Fidèle then made

a second choice, when he left the camp to move to Kampala, in 2012. “After one year in the camp, I felt that I could not live there any longer; it is not a real life, the one you live in the camps, you are just there waiting for someone who gives you something to eat.” As many other Congolese in Kampala, Fidèle survives on odd jobs, underpaid day labor, making just enough to pay the rent— 120,000 Ugandan shillings (around 30 euros) a month—for his small, windowless room. The perspective of resettlement remains a distant one, as Fidèle describes it: “What should I do? I went to the Office of the Prime Ministry and to the UNHCR offices many times to check my dossier, but they are always vague in their answers. After several years here, I know that I can only wait and rely on my faith and on God to be strong enough to overcome all this suffering.”¹²

As is clear from the example of Fidèle, the forces driving refugees’ lives in Kampala are mostly structural, invisible forces, against which one can do very little, or nothing. Other Congolese referred to a diffuse responsibility: the rebel groups in the Kivu region; the weakness of Congolese politics; the Ugandan government; the corruption in the Office of the Prime Ministry in Kampala; the UNHCR and the other international organizations; the “West,” which is not interested in their situation. It is not surprising that, in such a situation, spiritual forces are often mobilized in order to explain why someone’s dossier moves faster or another’s was delayed when the resettlement seemed to be around the corner. For these reasons, Congolese churches in Kampala regularly hold deliverance sessions in order to remove the blockages and allow the refugees to travel abroad.

Deliverance in the Refuge

Deliverance sessions, both private and collective, are frequent in Congolese Pentecostal churches in Kampala. Some of the *Églises de Réveil* in town have specific deliverance services, usually on Saturdays while others hold a deliverance session during Sunday services. In addition to this, as we have seen in the case of Balume, several Congolese “prophets” conduct private deliverance sessions at home. Deliverance sessions at church alternate preaching, singing, testimonies, and intense prayer. During one of these highly emotional moments at All Saved Church of Christ Ministries International, Albert prayed:

12. Interview with Fidèle, Kampala, 2 December 2014.

Oh Lord, my God, I thank you for the protection you give me every day. I pray to you for the blood of Jesus Christ to cover our country, DRC, which is still at war; to cover all of us who are here as refugees and vulnerable; to cover our families, those of us who are here, and those who stayed in Congo, and those who we do not know where they are... I pray you to deliver us from all demonic ties and to let us travel to the United States, so that we can start a new life and put an end to our suffering.¹³

The words in Albert's prayer are a concise illustration of some of the recurrent topics in Congolese Pentecostal churches in Kampala: the quest for individual and collective protection, for purification, and for the "miracle" of travelling abroad, putting an end to the long and uncertain "liminal" phase of the period spent in Uganda, waiting for resettlement. Deliverance assumes a prognostic component for refugees: the perspective of a future deliverance, often seen in terms of "travelling abroad" and finally settling down in a Western country.

As Obadare and Adebani (2010) have observed in the case of Nigerian migrants, specific rituals are performed when the problem a migrant is facing is not a "normal" one, and thus cannot be explained in rational terms. While being refused the visa once is "normal" in Nigeria, those who have been refused two or more times need to be anointed with oil in order to remove the demon who is preventing them from obtaining the visa.

Similarly, breaking the chains with the past by removing the ties, connections, and linkages with traditional spirits is key to removing blockages in the view of Congolese refugees. In this way, their suffering is transferred from the personal and social level to a spiritual one losing its "human" nature and becoming part of the wider problem of the presence of Evil in the world. Hence, the refugee status and living conditions inherent to it have to be considered within a moral system in which suffering is due to the action of evil spiritual forces. Olsen and Van Beek (2016) have shown that suffering is in itself an essential component of the concept of "Evil"; however, this does not mean that all suffering has to be interpreted within a moral frame. Sufferance caused by evil forces is a disproportionate and destructive one and, as such, is inexplicable. This kind of affliction contains a deep sense of injustice that makes it intolerable. The notion of "moral Evil" that is so central in the Pentecostal

13. "Seigneur, mon Dieu, je te remercie pour la protection que tu me donnes chaque jour; je te prie que le sang de Jésus Christ couvre notre pays, RDC, qui est encore en guerre; qu'il couvre nous tous, qui sommes ici réfugiés et vulnérables; qu'il couvre nos familles, celles qui sont ici, et celles qui sont restées au Congo, et celles que nous ne savons pas où elles sont... Je te prie de nous délivrer des tous liens avec les démons et de nous faire voyager aux États-Unis, pour qu'on puisse recommencer à vivre, pour mettre fin à nos souffrances" (Albert, All Saved Church of Christ, Kampala, 7 September 2014).

vision contributes to explain this condition, translating the actual nature of these disruptive forces in the language of the Manichean struggle between Good and Evil, the Christian mission of the absolution of sin and divine redemption through Jesus Christ. In this way, the Pentecostal discourse drastically simplifies the complexity of the forces at work that create the situation and living conditions of refugees, as they have been described, among others, by Lisa Malkki (1995). It shifts the problem of responsibility to a spiritual level that reduces the role of the political management of refugees.

Is this discourse created by the Congolese *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala aimed at justifying their presence and their role within the Congolese community? Or rather, should it be seen as a means for these same churches to make sense of a situation in which refugees are disempowered and are unable to change their condition and assert their own agency. Another possible interpretation of this narrative of immobility and of “*blocage*” would be to consider that refugees are empowered by the narrative, manage to escape from the social and political powers that keep them in an oppressed condition, and take a measure of control in their lives, wresting themselves from the authorities by placing themselves in the hands of spiritual forces that are responsible both for their suffering and their salvation. In this light, the power of institutions is weakened and the destiny of refugees is (re)situated within the framework of the never-ending war between Good and Evil.

“*Dieu prend son temps*”—Narratives of Waiting (Patience is a Virtue)

As I have mentioned in the previous sections, Congolese refugees often speak of their condition with reference to the biblical story of the “People of Israel” and of the “Promised Land.” These narratives are instruments through which Congolese churches in Kampala encourage their members to transpose the realization of their projects to an imagined future, expressed in the language of the Bible. Put this way, the everyday suffering of the refugees’ life in Kampala is placed within “God’s Plan” and becomes more acceptable if understood as a reenactment of biblical trials and tribulations, a desert crossing into the wilderness from whence one shall be delivered. This discourse is not, of course, specific to the Congolese churches, but rather a cornerstone of Christianity and the kind of narrative often present in diasporic churches. The specificity of the discourse one can hear in the *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala is the focus on waiting and the need to surrender to God’s will. As other authors have shown, the references to the “Promised Land” and to the “Chosen People” are often used to move Christians to undertake the evangelizing mission

(Fancello 2007) and to provide an alternative narrative of migration in which biblical metaphors push people to work to improve their condition (Maskens 2008). In the context I am analyzing, this reference is aimed at encouraging believers to be patient, and to surrender to God's will. If prayer is a form of "political praxis" (Marshall 2016), in Congolese churches in Kampala this praxis expresses the power relationships between refugees and the exterior authorities (the Ugandan state, the international forces, and so on). Spiritual warfare, deliverance and prayer cannot, in this context, be considered, as in other situations, "weapons" in the hands of a subaltern group who finds a way to affirm its will to "conquer the world" (Mottier 2008: 190). As Ruth Marshall (2016: 94) has clearly stated, the Pentecostal theology is "less a set of doctrines or dogmas than an ensemble of practices, the political valence of which depends on the ways in which in any given context they become operationalized as a pragmatic, strategic, concerted campaign." From this perspective, these Pentecostal "weapons" are the only instruments Congolese refugees have to express their critique of the administrative and bureaucratic obstacles they meet and the opacity of these procedures in the process of resettlement.

I will now provide some examples of this narrative, in which being patient, waiting for one's turn, accepting suffering and relying on God's will are central values to define the good Christian.

The first case comes from the preaching at the *Assemblée des Saints* church. As is often the case in this church as in other *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala, the sermon tends to focus on the need to be patient and to yield to God's will. One sentence the pastor whispered during his sermon was particularly explicit in this regard: "Nous ne pouvons pas faire beaucoup pour diriger notre destin; on est dans les mains de Dieu." Then, the pastor went on saying that only God knows what the future holds for each of the persons in the church and that it is thus necessary to surrender to His will and rely on Him, being aware that one day all the present suffering will be rewarded. In this example, we have a discourse that pushes believers to submission and to a resigned acceptance of their situation as their fate. In contrast stands the view of the "self-made man" and of the "reliable subject" (Boyd 2015) that is otherwise the emphasis of much of the preaching of neo-Pentecostal churches in Uganda and elsewhere.

In the second example, the refugees' condition is described as a "privileged" one, using the biblical metaphor of the "Chosen People" and citing the sentence: "Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires." Following this line, Pastor Constantin complained that "there are too many people who want to pass through the 'large door' and not through

the 'narrow door.' Yet, it is God who decides our way, not us." Given this perspective, suffering is the means to an end—to rise up towards God—and therefore assumes a positive meaning.

Waiting is thus part of a truly Christian life: "Even if you implore God every day, he won't answer you tomorrow. God takes his time; one needs to wait, patience is a gift for a Christian."¹⁴ The everyday struggle to change one's own situation is seen as useless and even detrimental, as people fall ill when they struggle too much. A born-again Christian when in trouble, Pastor Constantin concludes, needs to stop fighting and to rely on God: "We say that someone is patient when he does not struggle against other people to solve his problems; when he knows that the solution to these problems requires time and when he knows that God won't leave him alone with his problems."¹⁵

As a final example of this narrative of waiting and immobility, I refer to the frequent references to Kampala and Uganda as a land of passage, where refugees have to wait patiently for their turn to be resettled. Here, the feeling of being suspended in time is central, as pastor Filly of *Fepaco* church maintained during an interview: "I often say to my people at church that we are all here waiting, and that we need to be strong and patient. We are like the People of Israel, who waited for a long time in the desert before crossing it and reaching the Promised Land. It is for this reason that we need to stay together and to help each other. The church is a community where we can do this, and find some solace from the everyday suffering."¹⁶

Refugees, Language and the Crisis of Presence

In the context of refuge, the Pentecostal language is modified in order to adapt itself as a description of the life of refugees, present on foreign soil, and the suffering they experience. Most of the Congolese in Kampala perceive themselves as "marginal," individuals at the margins of history, in Gramscian terms,

14. "Même si tu implorés Dieu tous les jours, il ne te donnera pas la réponse demain. Dieu prend son temps; il faut attendre, la patience est un don pour le chrétien."

15. "On dit que quelqu'un est patient s'il ne se met pas à lutter contre les autres pour ses problèmes; quand il sait que la solution de ces problèmes demande du temps et il sait que Dieu ne le laissera pas seul, dans ce problème" (Interview with Pastor Constantin, Kampala, 10 December 2014).

16. "Je dis souvent à mes gens à l'Église qu'on est tous ici en attente, et qu'il faut être fort et patient; on est comme le peuple d'Israël qui a attendu longtemps dans le désert avant de terminer la traversée et d'arriver à la terre promise. C'est pour ça qu'on doit rester unis et se soutenir réciproquement. L'Église est une communauté où on peut faire ça, et trouver un peu de confort à la souffrance quotidienne" (Pastor Filly, *Fepaco*, Kampala, 2 October 2013).

or even “outside of history.” Disoriented, “*dépaysés*,” in a very literal sense of the term (without a country), often with no familiar points of reference, Congolese refugees live a condition of radical uncertainty in which their future plans are blurred (“*Combien de temps je resterai ici?*”) This situation can be analyzed in terms of the concept of “crisis of presence.” This critical state of existence is described by Ernesto De Martino (1948) as “very dangerous,” one in which individuals are “blocked,” unable to act and to direct their own actions. According to De Martino, individuals who are victims of the crisis of presence are neither able to establish a causal relationship between their suffering and the forces from which it originates, nor are they able to see any possible solution to their crisis.

Magic becomes, in such contexts, a cultural resource with which to face the crisis. It produces a meta-historical dimension that has a double function: on one hand, this plan creates a stable horizon, and in so doing it reduces uncertainty and confers meaning to the crisis itself; on the other, it is an instrument through which negative events are de-historicized and shifted from physical reality to a metaphysical level.¹⁷ The magico-religious civilization becomes, within this “dehistoricization of the negative”—as De Martino calls it—a sort of therapy with which to manage the crisis of presence. The ritual, with its formulas and actions is in fact, according to De Martino, the repetition of a myth in which all human events are explained and conveyed in the desired direction. In the case I am dealing with, the repetition of the biblical myth of the “Chosen People” of Israel who have to endure great suffering before reaching the “Promised Land” is likewise a meaningful tool to explain the presence of Congolese refugees in Uganda, as they are indeed a “liminal” group, marginal people who cannot easily find their rightful place within the order of the State. Quoting an expression from the “King Lear,” Victor Turner defined the liminal person as a “naked unaccommodated man”¹⁸—a life at the margins of society—and thus a life outside the social structure. As such, liminal people do not have the same rights as others. Describing the condition of liminal persons, in the chapter entitled “Betwixt and Between,” Turner (1967: 99) writes: “They have nothing; no status, property, secular clothing, rank, kinship position [...]. Their condition is indeed the very prototype of sacred poverty.” As outsider to the social organization that gives people legal and political rights, these persons are separated from society (and thus, “sacred”) as well as bereft of any right.

17. The Pentecostal rhetoric of the “break with the past” is another way of de-historicizing life events, one in which history becomes articulated in the present by redeeming the past and beginning again (VAN DER KAMP 2016: 28).

18. It is worth noting that “to accommodate” also means “to host” or “to find a place.”

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the initiated people Turner describes and the Congolese refugees who live in Kampala. The initiated young people going through rites of passage are in transition and their liminal position is temporary. Although the liminal period can be long, it is socially fixed, and they know that they have to return to society and take on social duties in accordance with their new status. In contrast, the “transition” of Congolese refugees does not have a set timeframe and the “liminal period” can often be extended to last for ten or more years, after which time it is very difficult to reintegrate the social fabric. In such a situation, people feel blocked in their liminal status and hardly see a solution to this indefinite holding pattern. The Pentecostal narrative of “*blocage*” and of waiting is particularly appropriate to describe this kind of experience and to frame it within a spiritual discourse.



Pentecostalism is widely known for its emphasis on being a transnational movement, for its portability and flexibility, making it a highly mobile faith, one that is particularly apt at incarnating a narrative of mobility and migration.

Yet, as I have shown in this article, this flexibility also allows the Pentecostal language to become an idiom of waiting and immobility as well. In a context in which the period of waiting for resettlement in Uganda is becoming longer and longer, receiving a visa and travelling abroad have come to be seen by Congolese refugees in Kampala as a “miracle.” Most perceive their lives as “blocked,” and Pentecostals, in particular, attribute this situation to witchcraft attacks. The lives of refugees in Kampala, as elsewhere, are largely driven by structural forces as they see themselves lacking the means with which to improve their situation, thus considering the only solution to be God’s intervention which alone can “unblock” them and allow them to reach the “Promised Land” of resettlement.

Moreover, the opacity of the bureaucratic procedures of resettlement leaves room for alternative narratives, in which the action of satanic forces is held responsible for blocking the refugees’ dossiers, thus preventing them from being resettled.

In this way, the disproportionate suffering of refugees is shifted from a social to a spiritual level. Although this may be interpreted as a way to “neutralize” the criticism towards the institutions involved, it might also be viewed—as I have suggested—as the only way for Congolese refugees to

express their criticism of them, by “demonizing” them and by framing their condition within a narrative of witchcraft and of “*blocage*.”

In Pentecostal language, the worldview changes to describe and give meaning to the refugees’ past and present experience. Instead of emphasizing the “active subject” and the “self-made man” as in other Ugandan Pentecostal churches, in Congolese *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala, pastors often insist on the need for believers to surrender to God’s will and to be patient. Congolese pastors propose patience, prayer and faith as the main virtues for a Christian refugee. In so doing, they elaborate a “narrative of waiting” in which the long period spent in Kampala has to be seen as a journey through enduring suffering (the “desert” or “wilderness” in the biblical metaphor) to purify, to break the chain with the past life and with traditional spirits, to be finally able to travel and reach the promised destination.

The message of these “refugee churches” is then partially different from what is commonly heard in other Pentecostal churches in Uganda: not acting to change one’s future (or to change “the Nation”), but patiently waiting for one’s turn to be resettled while continuing individually and collectively to wage spiritual warfare against the Evil amidst, be it in Uganda or across the border in the DRC.

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ABSTRACT

Based on fieldwork conducted in 2013 and 2014, this article analyses the role of religion in a context of displacement, where 40,000 refugees from the Kivu region of the Democratic Republic of Congo have been living in Kampala, Uganda. It focuses on the presence of Congolese *Églises de Réveil* in the neighborhood of Katwe, one of the most populated areas of Kampala. After introducing the context, it first examines the concept of “*blocage*” (“being stuck/immobilized”) to demonstrate the way in which it is used to make sense of the difficulties that Congolese refugees experience in the process of resettlement. Second, it focuses on the role of religious language and beliefs in describing situations of mobility and of immobility to then examine the transformation of religious language itself, in particular, when it interprets the refugees’ condition in terms of witchcraft, deliverance and spiritual warfare.

Keywords: Congo (DRC), Kampala, Awakening Churches, mobility/immobility, refugees, witchcraft.

RÉSUMÉ

Coincés à Kampala. Attaques sorcellaires, blocages et immobilité dans l’expérience de Congolais born-again réfugiés en Ouganda.— À partir d’un terrain mené en 2013 et 2014, cet article analyse le rôle de la religion dans un contexte de déplacement où 40 000 réfugiés provenant de la région de Kivu de la République démocratique du Congo vivent à Kampala en Ouganda. Cette recherche porte sur la présence des Églises de Réveil congolaises dans le quartier de Katwe, l’un des endroits le plus peuplé de Katwe. Après avoir présenté ce contexte, le concept de « *blocage* » est d’abord examiné afin de démontrer comment il est utilisé pour donner du sens aux difficultés rencontrées par les réfugiés congolais et à leur expérience lors du processus de réinstallation. Ensuite, cet article focalise sur le rôle du langage religieux et de l’utilisation des croyances afin de décrire les situations de mobilité et d’immobilité, pour ensuite se pencher sur la transformation du langage religieux lui-même, en particulier lorsqu’il interprète la condition des réfugiés en termes de sorcellerie, délivrance et combat spirituel.

Mots-clés: Congo (RDC), Kampala, Églises de Réveil, mobilité/immobilité, réfugiés, sorcellerie.