

“Are We an Elected People?”
Religion and the Everyday Experience of
Young Congolese Refugees in Kampala

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Preface

While I was working on this chapter in late August 2018, the Italian media were busy telling the story of the “Diciotti,” a boat of the Italian navy that had been kept in the harbor of Catania, Sicily, for several days with 177 people on board, mostly Eritrean asylum seekers. The Italian government refused to let them disembark, arguing that other countries of the European Union (EU) should take a number of the asylum seekers. Matteo Salvini, the interior minister at the time, was particularly vocal in asking the EU for a shared solution, while a number of organizations held a demonstration in the harbor asking to let the asylum seekers free. The event was highly spectacularized by the Italian media, with images of the people stuck on the boat, of their weak bodies, and of testimonies from doctors and volunteers who went on board to check the conditions of the people on the boat.

There was in that period—and there still is—a general overexposure of the so-called refugee crisis in the Italian media; yet, in the case of the “Diciotti” ship, data show that the number of asylum seekers who had arrived in the country from the beginning of 2018 till August had decreased by around 80 percent, if compared to the previous year. Almost everyone in Italy knows about this and other stories, and yet very little is known about the everyday life asylum seekers and refugees live after they disembark in Italy.

When speaking of refugees, the focus in the media (and often in scholarly work) is on “crisis,” “emergency,” thus on extraordinary situations and conditions of people fleeing from wars, famines, persecutions. Despite this, displaced people

often live for extended periods in the country where they find refuge, waiting for resettlement to a third country, or to go back to their home country. What about the ordinariness of their lives and of their everyday experience in these transit countries?

Starting from eight months of fieldwork carried out in Kampala from 2013 to 2015, this chapter focuses on the everyday experiences of Congolese refugees living in the urban areas of the capital city of Uganda, specifically in the neighborhood of Katwe, and on the role religion plays in daily circumstances. With this focus, it aims at showing how refugees try to carry out a life project in the new context, and to what extent religion contributes in conferring a sense of “ordinariness” to the long period of transition in Kampala waiting to be resettled. It does so by highlighting the complex interactions they establish with the religious domain, striving to build a frame to explain their condition of “people on the move” and their suffering and maneuvering this sphere in order to gain a reputation within the Congolese community in Kampala and experience social mobility in a general context of poverty and stuckness. Negotiating the official narratives produced by Congolese churches in town, refugees often react to and translate these narratives in a highly creative (and at times critical) way in the everydayness of their urban lives.

The Context: Congolese Refugees in Katwe (Kampala)

The phenomenon of refugees living in African urban contexts (also referred to as “urban refugees”) is still understudied. Some 75,000 asylum seekers and refugees were living in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, at the end of August 2018.¹ Around 40,000 of them were Congolese, mostly from the Kivu region in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), an area that has been devastated by conflicts and violence for the last three decades.

The number of urban refugees—people who decide to live in town rather than in the UNHCR camps—is increasing in Uganda as well as in other African countries.² The Ugandan “Refugee Bill” (2006, applied in 2009) has been regarded as an exception in the African context, as it recognizes the right of refugees to live anywhere in the country, to move freely, and to work; yet, at the same time, it states that they do not receive any assistance outside of refugee camps (Kreibaum 2016).³ The Refugee Bill received criticism because it is still insufficient to guarantee protection and assistance for those who live in urban contexts (Bernstein and Okello 2007). This is even more significant considering

that the period of “temporary protection” in Uganda has become longer and longer, so that many people are experiencing “protracted refugee situations” (five years or more waiting for resettlement).

Following these recent changes in the legislation, and because of the prolonged period of staying in Uganda waiting for resettlement, a growing number of Congolese decide to leave refugee camps and move to town in search for employment and better educational opportunities for their children (Omata 2012).

The UNHCR gives refugees three options: an assisted voluntary return to their home country, integration in the host country, and resettlement to a third country. With some exceptions, the Congolese refugees I met in Kampala did not plan to stay in Uganda; some of them were willing to go back to the DRC, although only few were finally able to do it, because of the persistent violence in the Kivu region. The majority were instead waiting for resettlement to a European or North American country, and complained about the excessive length and the opacity of these processes; some had already been living in Uganda for ten years or more.

This was mostly a young population, navigating the urban life with little aid from the Ugandan state or from international organizations. In this situation of extreme physical and existential uncertainty, religion becomes for many refugees a resource for meaning-making, to explain their condition and to locate their everyday life of suffering and waiting in Kampala within a meaningful frame. Thus, religious congregations, and mainly the *Églises de Réveil*,⁴ are a space to find solace from everyday suffering and to share experiences and emotions with others (Gusman 2020).

Pentecostal churches are often the first place Congolese address to find a place to stay at their arrival in Kampala (it is not unusual to be hosted at a church for some weeks or months); these churches offer first aid and the possibility to build new social networks. The lack of welfare from the Ugandan state and from international organizations creates the condition for churches to become service providers, too. Many of my Congolese interlocutors in Kampala converted to Pentecostalism (mostly from Catholicism) after having been hosted or helped by Pentecostal congregations during the first months in town.

In the new context, Congolese refugees often build “kinship-like” relationships with people they have just met. It is not infrequent for those who arrive alone to be “adopted” by a family of refugees, and to live with them for a period, waiting to settle in the new context, or even for several years. This was, for instance, the case for Héritier, who came from a Muslim family and

converted to Pentecostalism after becoming part of his “new family” whom he met in Kampala. In contexts of migration and forced displacement, fictive kinship often helps people to reproduce family relationships. Churches play an important role in this process of reconstructing social and intimate relationships after the arrival in Uganda, as people stay together on the basis of a common faith, instead of a common lineage. Moreover, priests and pastors can become surrogate parent figures, especially for young people who are hosted at church or who find in the congregation a sort of extended family in the absence of relatives (Morgan 2019). 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 is often the case, they rely on the “protective networks” organized by religious organizations (Sommers 2001), which help them settle in town by providing information on how to live and move in the urban context and on how to apply for the refugee status.

Although Congolese refugees live in different areas of Kampala, the highest density is in Katwe, one of the poorest neighborhoods of the capital city. Until the 1970s, this area was almost unpopulated and covered by swamps. Its growth in the last decades has been due mainly to the arrival of migrants from the rural areas and of refugees from neighboring countries.

In September 2013, I mapped the presence of fourteen *Églises de Réveil* in Katwe, which I call “refugees churches” as the quasi-totality of their audience is composed by Congolese and other francophone refugees from neighboring countries; all of these congregations—with one exception—had been founded in Kampala by Congolese pastors after 2000. Considering the broader context of Kampala, in November 2014, the *Communauté chrétienne congolaise en Ouganda* comprised fifty-five Congolese churches and seventy churches in total in the country. However, this figure seems to be largely incomplete as, according to the leader of the association, there were at the time around 150 *Églises de Réveil* in Kampala alone.

The size of these congregations is usually small (30 to 300 members), and fluctuating, as Congolese move frequently from one church to another. Church buildings are in simple and perishable materials, such as wood and metal sheeting.

Religion and Everyday Experience

The idea of this chapter grew out of a sense of dissatisfaction I felt during fieldwork for some widespread representations about refugees’ trajectories and about the place of religion in their everyday life. Despite the significant body of

work on the religion-migration link, the role of religion in displacement contexts has not been extensively explored in literature. Refugee studies generally focus on livelihood strategies and economic and demographic aspects, leaving the religious side—and thus processes of meaning-making—apart.

Some of these representations clashed against the empirical data of my research, as they seemed not to consider the dimension of “life as it is lived,” the everyday experience of refugees in the transit country.

Observers’ attention, when it comes to refugees, has often been caught by the extraordinary, the newsworthy, the “crisis,” rather than by the daily life people live, its routines and its challenges. This is not limited to the analysis of displacement contexts, but a more general tendency within social sciences, part of what Sherry Ortner (2016) has defined as the turn to a “dark anthropology.” The ordinary has been in part abandoned as if it were not interesting, compared to the “spectacular” and the extraordinary (Highmore 2010; Rakodi 2014: 84). Yet, a focus on the everyday is part and parcel of the ethnographic practice, as the approach to the field includes experience-near encounters with common people in their daily occupations. It is thus not surprising that in recent years there has been an increasing attention to the everyday and to the ordinary in anthropology (Lambek 2010; Schielke 2010; Schielke and Debevec 2012; Mattingly 2013; Das 2015).

In the case of refugees, this focus on people’s ordinary life allows—I argue—to nuance the image of refugees as passive and vulnerable subjects who need help and to analyze how they are busy building their lives with new meanings and routines in transit contexts. This makes it possible to look at refugees’ cultural creativity and to the strategies they employ to engage with structural powers in their everyday lives (De Certeau 1984).

Moreover, studies on the role of religion in displacement contexts have mostly focused on churches as actors of social welfare and as resources in an emergency (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2011; Lauterbach 2014), leaving aside their place in the construction of a frame through which refugees try to make sense of their suffering.

Taking these considerations as a starting point, I felt it was necessary for me to rethink some of the approaches I had used until that moment. This implied two interrelated shifts: first of all, I needed to focus more on the ordinariness of the life of the Congolese people I was working with in Kampala. During the first months of fieldwork, the time I spent with them had been mostly marked by routines, common daily activities, dull and exciting moments, sharing of meals, and other ordinary activities. The existence these “urban refugees” carried on

in Kampala seemed to me not so “extra-ordinary,” nor something one could define as “emergency,” as most of them had been living in town for several years, struggling to find a way to survive, a house to live, and places in which to build a sense of “home” and of belonging in their exile (Russell 2011).

As the focus of my research was the place of religion in refugees’ lives, I had to analyze not only the role Christian churches and religious organizations played in providing refugees a shelter at their arrival in town, a help with the bureaucratic procedures at the Office of the Prime Minister in charge of their dossiers, and with other practical and material needs. There was, I was beginning to realize, much more to explore by focusing on “lived” or “everyday religion,” thus acknowledging that religious sentiments are rooted in the lifeworlds of individuals and groups (Streib, Dinter, and Söderblom 2008) and the work of social agents as narrators and interpreters of their own experiences and stories (Orsi 2010).

This does not mean to set lived religion against religious institutions,⁵ but rather to analyze how the two dimensions, the existential and the institutional, are related and contribute together in giving shape to the everyday of Congolese refugees in Kampala.

For many of my Congolese interlocutors in Kampala—as surely in other contexts—religion seemed to provide not only (spiritual) means for coping with their situation but also a sense of normality in their lives; it is exactly this ordinariness that is often undervalued in scholarly works on refugees. Refugees’ situation is often thought and described in terms of its “extraordinariness” and as an “emergency”; yet, for people who have been living in Kampala for years (not unusually five or more), there is also the need to carry out an “ordinary” life, although amid the harshness of the situation they live as refugees. The frequent references to the need to surrender to “God’s will,” to be patient and wait for one’s turn (to be resettled, mainly), and to Uganda as a land of passage before reaching the “Promised Land” may be seen as a way to neutralize social criticism toward the national and international institutions; yet, they are also an instrument to shift the refugees’ disproportionate suffering from a social to a spiritual level. Religion thus becomes a resource to face suffering, as it provides refugees with a meta-historical narrative and with habituated actions⁶ that create a stable horizon, helping reducing uncertainty in believers’ everyday lives.

With this approach based on everyday religion, I aim at analyzing the interactions between religion and other social spheres from the perspective of common believers, who in daily life negotiate, doubt, rely on, and strategically use their faith. This implies to give up on the need for coherence between religious

“grand schemes” and the “ordinary lives” people live (Schielke and Debevec 2012); contradictions and ambiguities have not to be discarded as problematic, but rather considered as constitutive of the “grand schemes” themselves. Official narratives do of course have a role as a guide for believers in the everyday actions in the world and the way they see and think about it, but they play this part within a precise context; they are in fact “informed by the lifeworld they are embedded in” (Schielke and Debevec 2012: 2). This is why religious practices are unsystematic, complex, and plural in the everyday.

An ethnographic focus on everyday religion shows how believers use, negotiate and rearrange beliefs, norms, and the ordering of life religious institutions set, in order to navigate their daily existence and to make sense of their condition. Hence the need for attention to the small scale of everyday practices, actions, and strategies; these dimensions are intrinsically central to the ethnographic practice, and yet sometimes they seem to be nonessential in scholarly approaches that focus on refugees’ exceptionality and do not consider the everyday lives they live in contexts of refuge.

Against this background, the aim of this chapter is to analyze the role of Pentecostal religion in the everyday life of my Congolese interlocutors in Kampala. Rather than focusing on beliefs expressed during church services, the point is to highlight the complex and often ambiguous relationships between the “grand schemes” of Pentecostal discourse (i.e., the representation of a moral subject and of a “good Christian” who is patient and fully relies on God’s will) and the everyday practices and ordinary lives people live as refugees in Kampala. This approach is influenced by recent developments in anthropological theory around the notions of ordinary or everyday ethics (Lambek 2010; Das 2015) and of lived religion.

Theorists of “ordinary ethics” have more or less explicitly tried to keep the institutional religious side out of the ethical domain (Lambek 2012), arguing that ethics is “relatively tacit, grounded in agreement rather than rule” (Lambek 2010: 2). In partial contrast with this approach, Joel Robbins has expressed the concern that obscuring the contribution of religion to ethics is a potential blind spot of most of the studies on ordinary ethics (Robbins 2016: 3). He claims for a focus on transcendent religious values, especially as they are expressed through rituals, as constitutive of believers’ ethical sensibilities they apply in everyday practices. While I agree with his concerns over the marginal role played by religion in the growing body of work on everyday ethics in anthropology—and I suggest this is mainly due to a way of thinking about religion as a transmitted set of ideas as opposed to everyday practices—I object to his view that everyday

ethics finds its foundation in “transcendent religious values.” Rather than thinking about these values as constitutive of everyday ethics, I argue for an understanding of religion as lived experience, in which the main focus is on “what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds” (Orsi 2003: 172). I thus share Birgit Meyer’s and Dick Houtman’s critique of the mentalistic understanding of religion, grounded in the Protestant tradition, and share the idea that “religion becomes palpable through people, their practices and use of things” (2012: 7).

In order to enlighten the role of meaning-making religion plays in contexts of refuge, the next section focuses on the way the adherence to the Pentecostal movement frames the experience of being a refugee. Through the identification with the story of the people of Israel, Congolese refugees find continuity in their discontinuous experience, a parallelism with the “elected people,” thus being able to rebuild a moral world based on the assumption of a future redemption from their present situation.

Pentecostal Narratives, Sense-making, and the Ordinariness of Refugees’ Experience

In this section, I explore narratives adopted in religious discourses in order to reflect upon and explain the refugees’ situation, and how refugees use these discourses in their everyday living in order to build a frame from which to explain their past and present condition.

Most of the Congolese refugees and asylum seekers I met in Kampala lived in a state of extreme uncertainty, also due to the lack of protection and assistance from the Ugandan state and the UNHCR. This creates a situation in which legal uncertainty and physical insecurity are part and parcel of their everyday experience.

Given this situation, religious idioms become a resource for them in the effort to situate their condition within a meaningful framework. The Pentecostal discourse is transformed, in order to become an instrument to describe the condition of being a refugee: the uncertainty, the sense of being suspended in time, and the need to find a “community of trust” (Lyytinen 2017) that are central to their experience.

One of the most common narratives Congolese refugees refer to is the story of the people of Israel and the crossing of the desert. Here, the indeterminate process

of waiting in the transit country is represented as similar to the long way Jews had to walk in order to reach the “Promised Land” (the country of resettlement). In this narrative, a “good Christian” needs to be patient and to put his life in the hands of God, aware that the promise to reach a new land will be fulfilled, one day or another.

It is through this parallel with the people of Israel that Congolese refugees in Kampala try to make sense of suffering as part of God’s plans for them. Several times my interlocutors mentioned in our conversations the following biblical saying: “Happy are those who are persecuted because they do what God requires.” From this perspective, afflictions can thus be converted into a way to elevate oneself, the instrument through which to become the “elected people.” Stories of those who had already been resettled to Europe (mainly Norway, Denmark, and Sweden) or North America—and who are in touch with refugees in Kampala through Facebook and other social media—with their testimonies of the “new and prosperous life” they started in the resettlement country, nourished the idea that the challenges refugees faced in the past, and were still facing in Uganda, were necessary steps toward the “Promised Land.” As one of my interlocutors put it, his past life in the DRC was no less than “captivity,” as he saw no hopes for his country of origin to go out of the wars that have been devastating it for decades; his long staying in Kampala (six years) was instead the period of redemption, to become “a new person” and be able to finally reach his final destination.

It is interesting to notice here that flexibility of Pentecostal language makes it possible to adapt it to express immobility, as in the case of Congolese refugees who are waiting for resettlement. With the emphasis on deliverance and the break with a sinful past (individual or collective), this powerful interpretative narrative defines this experience of immobility, a situation Congolese refugees often explain in terms of spiritual “blocages” attributed to witchcraft (Gusman 2018). Through this idiom, suffering is transferred from the personal and social level to a spiritual one, as a part of the wider problem of the presence of evil in the world. Hence, the refugees’ situation has to be seen within a moral system in which suffering is due to the action of evil spiritual forces and in which Pentecostalism offers a temporary frame according to which people are on the move to the promised land, but not there yet.

Undoubtedly, this kind of narratives influences the way Pentecostal Congolese conceive their lives in Kampala and the “protracted refugee situation” many of them experience, and the way they act in daily contexts. Yet, this should not lead to the conclusion that believers are passive receivers of the discourses Pentecostal churches produce and disseminate. On the contrary, in their everyday activities, Congolese refugees reworked these narratives in order to adapt them to different

contexts and situations. As Ruth Marshall 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” (Marshall 2016: 94). This definition is close to my notion of religion as lived experience, in which the focus is on the way people use and elaborate religious idioms and beliefs.

The ethnographic approach provides a deeper perspective on the way people interact with and negotiate these narratives in their everyday lives outside the church. In these contexts, the young Congolese refugees I worked with made frequent references to their faith and to the moral and spiritual help it provided to face uncertainties, doubts, and challenges. To provide an example of this role of faith in everyday contexts, I will focus briefly on prayer. While most of my interlocutors during church services prayed in a highly emotional and intense way, asking God for help and for a “miracle,” following some of them in their daily work, routines, and duties I noticed how the presence of prayer was constant, yet very different from what I had observed in church. When it accompanied everyday activities, prayer became quiet and constant, a form of self-discipline, both for the mind and for the body, as, for instance, in situations when one had been walking for a long distance to sell merchandise at the market, or when people pray while fasting.

Furthermore, it was in these situations that I noticed the way my interlocutors negotiated with and transformed the narratives I had heard in the *Églises de Réveil* in town. On the one hand, they regularly repeated that one needs to be patient and to rely on God, as “he always has a solution for us,” which is one of the most recurrent topics in Congolese “refugees churches” in Kampala. On the other hand, in the way they acted and talked, they showed a constant and complex interaction with the values preached at church. This was clear in several situations, when they disclosed sometimes that it is hard to be patient and wait, especially when one is tired, angry, or worried. In one of these situations, Erick—one of the young Congolese I was going around with—resorted to his brilliant irony to ask for my help: “It’s already night and I have sold only one belt in the whole day. I have been waiting for God’s help for all the day, but he forgot to answer to my prayers; could you maybe lend me 10.000 US\$?”

Faith as a Guide in Everyday Situations

Erick, together with his friend Héritier, was one of the key persons to help me understand the role of Pentecostal faith in the everyday lives of young Congolese

refugees in Kampala. Erick had arrived in Uganda in 2011 from Bukavu, where his parents were both killed. He was twenty-one at the time, and in Kampala he had to become the breadwinner for his family, looking after his five younger brothers and sisters.

At the arrival in town, Erick did not know anyone, so he was advised to go to a Congolese church in Katwe with his brothers and sisters, and there they were hosted for the first three months. Some members of the congregation also helped them with the documents to request the refugee status, and to find a small house of two rooms, where they moved and where they were still living when I met them.

The first time I met Erick, he was at a clinic, recovering from a serious gastroenteritis, and with a bill of something more than \$200 to pay. His friends took up a collection and put together part of the sum, but were still short of \$30. That was when one of the Congolese I was working with took me to the clinic. I paid the remaining sum, and Erick received the treatments he still needed. The following day he was released from the clinic.

It was on this occasion that Erick revealed his faith, saying, “I knew God would find a solution to my problem, and you are that solution.” That sentence made me a bit nervous, to be honest. I did not reply to it; yet, from my perspective, the reason why I got to the clinic and paid part of the bill was that one of his friends asked me for help. The rhetoric of God’s help seemed to me somehow out of place, in that context. I was wrong, as I did not recognize the role of the religious frame that informed that way of speaking, and more or less consciously I confined that kind of discourse to the church setting.

After that day, I heard Erick and other Congolese repeat that same (or similar) sentence many other times, in different situations. “God has a solution for my problems” and “I rely on God, he always has a solution” were recurrent expressions for my Congolese interlocutors, to defuse everyday difficulties.

After Erick left the clinic, we started to meet frequently, at least two to three times a week, most often at the seat of the small association, he and other Congolese had founded in Kampala. It was at that time that I started spending more and more time outside churches and organizations, to share daily routines with mainly four young Congolese refugees. It was through this different positioning that I began to realize the life they were living in Kampala was an “ordinary” life, despite its harshness: a life not only of everyday efforts and labors to make a living, of uncertainties, and of doubts but also of periods of calm, talks with friends, clothes to wash, and meals to cook. The challenges they had to face were not much related to their “extraordinary” condition as refugees; the main

difficulties they encountered in their urban lives were not so different from those of many Ugandans residing in the slum of Katwe. Despite the image of a constant emergency and the widespread imaginary around refugees, the Congolese I met in Kampala struggled to live an ordinary life and to build an everyday routine, in order to make it possible to organize their life during the long stay in Kampala. Their faith—through the constant presence of prayer and of Christian music in their daily routines; the help in reconstructing social relationship in Kampala with the common belonging to a church; and the frame it provided to understand their condition of refugee—played an important role in the construction of this ordinariness, instead of their being in transit in Kampala (yet, as we have seen, usually a prolonged period of transition) and “out of structure” in the context of refuge, with little institutional assistance and officially waiting for resettlement.

So, part of this ordinariness, for born-again people, was the place Christian faith and prayer had in everyday life. During the three months he spent at a Congolese church after his arrival in Kampala, Erick converted to Pentecostalism (in the DRC he was a Catholic) and received the baptism. During our conversations, he told me several times that in the beginning his conversion was, at least in part, instrumental. With this, he did not mean he converted because he was hosted in a Pentecostal church, but rather since he thought becoming born-again was a way to obtain a miracle, as he seemed to have no other hopes to find a way out from his situation.

I felt I was too young and weak to take on the responsibility of my brothers and sisters; I was so lost, alone, I was worried and distressed about how to find a survival in this place. I did not know what to do, and I felt that the only solution was to receive a miracle from God, so I started praying, praying and praying, for many hours a day, without even having a break to eat something. And in my prayers, I was always asking God to help me, to send me a sign. I was angry, because he did listen to my requests; but he was the only one who could do it.

Erick said that with time he started to develop a new awareness that the role religion played in his life was a different one: after two months in the church, he felt that faith was becoming a help to orientate and settle in the new context, and not to lose himself in the harshness of the circumstances he was living:

Many people lose themselves, here. 90% of the Congolese in Kampala haven't a good life, so many just start doing bad things (prostitution, robberies, . . .). In Congo, although I came from a Catholic family I was a “big pagan” but, since I arrived here, God is the guide in my life. At the beginning I felt bad when people told me “God helps you.” I looked at my life and I felt like they were mocking

me, but then I realized that God was doing a lot in my life, not miracles or big things (like getting a visa to travel abroad) but helping me to survive and in my daily choices.

Instead of a request for miracles, according to Erick, prayer became a moral and spiritual guide, and a sort of protection in his life. This is in line with the results of the research Eveliina Lyytinen carried out among Congolese in Kampala, which shows that a large majority of Congolese refugees relied on the support found in Christian churches—mainly Pentecostal—and that they consider the assistance provided by Pentecostal churches more in terms of spiritual protection than of material help (Lyytinen 2017: 999).

As in the answer Pam—one of her interviewees—gives to Nancy Tatom Ammerman, I would say that for most of the Congolese who were part of my research, faith can ground them “when things seem to be spinning out of control” (2013: 1). With this, I mean that faith for Congolese born-again refugees is a lens through which to look at everyday events and difficulties, build relationships with people, and think and (re)imagine their present, past, and future life. This perspective contributes to create a self-discipline in their lives and participates in the construction of the believer’s subjectivity, made explicit through prayers practices at church, but also through daily practices at work, at home and elsewhere.

Yet, self-disciplining does not mean that moral dictates are absolute, and that following their guidance is to submit oneself to a moral regime. As recent developments in the directions of an analysis of “ordinary ethics” in anthropology suggest, analysis based on this kind of Foucauldian assumptions may entail the risk of missing some key elements of moral practice, as they do not account for “the vagaries of everyday life and the difficulties of discerning what might constitute the most morally appropriate action in the singular circumstances life presents. It is insufficient for examining how people face changing worlds or situations in which it is unclear what kind of self one ought to become” (Mattingly 2013: 304). Since Durkheim, anthropologists have tended to give too much emphasis on morality as social obligations imposed upon individuals. Yet, describing people’s behavior in terms of a mechanical self-reproduction of social structures takes the anthropologist far from the complexities of judgments and actions the researcher experiences through the ethnographic approach, with its focus on the first-person perspective of the subject, and on life as it is lived by particular people. From this point of view, “ethical life” (Keane 2014) has to be found in the interstices of everyday activities and practices, rather than in abstract social norms. This “action-centred approach to ethics” (Lambek 2010:

16) suggests that making judgments in everyday life is a much more complex affair than following a set of norms.

A widespread Pentecostal narrative advocates that following the norms of Pentecostal faith leads to predictable effects (salvation, prosperity, health, and wealth); however, these effects are located in an undetermined future. In daily circumstances, this predictability is made much less certain due to the intricacies and the multifaceted nature of social life; thus, in real life, religious “grand schemes” are always negotiated by subjects, in their effort to live a “good life.”

In the case of Congolese born-again refugees in Kampala, what the Pentecostal narrative offers to believers is a moral guidance and sense-making frame through which they interpret their condition. This leads them in the effort to be patient and endure their misfortunes. Yet, in daily contexts, they often negotiate, interpret, and sometimes criticize this guidance and frame, in order to adapt it to their condition.

Religion in the Construction of Leadership in the Refugees’ Community

Another way in which Congolese born-again establish a complex relationship with the religious sphere is by maneuvering it in order to gain a reputation within the Congolese community in town.

As already mentioned, Congolese Pentecostal churches in Kampala are also spaces to build social relationships and construct social networks that can be of help in enriching one’s social capital. The Congolese community in Kampala is a “deparentalized” one, in which most of the old people were killed or remained in the DRC, and in which the gerontocratic system does not work any longer. Churches thus become also an instrument of social mobility for some young Congolese who find there a space of leadership among the community of refugees. Although some of these churches do not survive for more than a few years, others are well established. In this final section of the chapter, I analyze the way some Congolese pastors have been able to make the most of the opportunities this specific social conditions generate.

Literature on religion in migration contexts often underlines the extent to which belonging to religious groups can be considered as a coping mechanism for migrants, providing a sort of “home away from home” (Adogame 1998). This view, however, appears to be too narrow, as it assumes that religion has a merely protective role and a tendency to lock people within a closed circle.

Although this of course at times happens, it is important to investigate also the way Pentecostal messages may become a stimulus to entrepreneurship, even in situations in which economic resources are limited, as in the case of the large majority of Congolese refugees in Kampala.

Pentecostal discourses often are about the way believers should organize to manage one's life in order to be able to start a business; here, religious messages become instructions on how to follow biblical values to develop the capacity to run one's affairs in ways that pleases God (Van Dijk 2009: 106). This is evident in many cases in which Congolese in Kampala start a small business (a hairdressing salon, a tailoring shop, a commerce of small jewelry, etc.) with the material and spiritual support of the congregation they belong to, as in the story of Hortense, a tailor who was living alone in Kampala with her three children. After some months since her arrival in town, Hortense was looking for ways to start a tailoring shop, but she had no means to do it. Thanks to her faith, she explained, “God helped me, connecting me with generous people at the church, who bought a sewing machine for me and gave me some money to pay the rent of the shop for the first three months. This is how I started my new life.”

This inclination becomes even more manifest in cases where Congolese Pentecostals decide to start their own *Église de Réveil* in Kampala. A number of studies have already investigated the correlation between the growth of the Pentecostal movement and the capitalist (or neoliberal) expansion in the African continent. Central to the interpretation of this link has been the concept of “occult economies” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999), which positions the rise of Pentecostalism—and mainly of the so-called prosperity gospel—as part of a wider response to the economic crises and inquietudes generated by the insertion in a global capitalist economy. Yet, more recent studies in part distanced themselves from this interpretation, examining local entanglements between the economic sphere and Pentecostal practice, thus highlighting different and more complex ways of defining “prosperity” (Haynes 2012). Again, the ethnographic in-depthness allows for a more nuanced representation of how actual practices do not conform to “grand schemes” (here, the mainline narrative on prosperity within the Pentecostal movement), and rather they transform and adapt these schemes to local situations.

The Ugandan media often portrays the success of the Pentecostal movement in the country through the reference to some few successful figures of “rock star” pastors, with Pastor Robert Kayanja—founder of the Miracle Center and today leader of that veritable religious enterprise called “Kanyanja Ministries”—as a major example of this religious entrepreneurship.

In opposition to this widespread image, the Congolese churches and pastors I am dealing with in this contribution are part of a constellation of small and medium-sized churches that form the large majority of the more than 1,000 Pentecostal churches in Kampala (Figure 7.1).

In the situation of existential uncertainty and of socioeconomic fragility that marks the lives of the majority of the Congolese living in Kampala, ideas of “success” and “prosperity” take on a different meaning, as people often react to socioeconomic harshness by looking for networks of trust and of mutual help to start small commercial activities, rather than for a neoliberal momentum toward individualism which is part of a sometimes simplified scholarly interpretation of the prosperity gospel.

In this context, the “success” of pastors’ religious entrepreneurship has to be conceived in terms of their role of leadership and of the building of a reputation within the Congolese community, rather than from the model of the car they drive or of the size of their house. The stories of some of these Congolese pastors in Kampala show how individuals—especially under circumstances of intense social and economic change—can manipulate the religious field in order to build their leadership within a group.



Figure 7.1 One of the numerous Congolese Pentecostal churches in Kampala; photo by Alessandro Gusman.

Pastor Shadrac arrived in Uganda from Bukavu in 2008, fleeing the conflict after his mother had been killed. When we met in Kampala in 2013, he was the main pastor of a small Congolese church in Katwe, started in 2009 by another Congolese pastor, who had resettled in the United States in 2012 and left him the leadership of the church. The congregation was at that time a small one, of around 50 members; one year later, under Shadrac’s leadership, it had grown to around 120. Yet, since the first time we met, he expressed the will to start his own church and “to train men of God.”

Following his view, in 2014 Shadrac left the older church to start working on his own church. Indeed, the inauguration of “The Shelter: New Generation of Pentecostal Churches” took place almost one year later, although the building had been completed in 2017 only. The new congregation had around 60 members, while today it is a medium-sized congregation of almost 200 believers.

What is interesting in Shadrac’s story is that his “success” (again, more in terms of reputation and leadership than of material wealth) has been due mainly to his ability to act within the Congolese religious field in Kampala to start a new religious project, investing not only his own time and work but also his economic resources, as he sold his old car, a Prado, to collect money for the new building. He thus took an entrepreneurial risk, leaving a church that had grown under his leadership, but that was not “his” church, to realize his vision. In doing this, Shadrac—like other Congolese pastors in Kampala—made use of his charisma, mainly his ability in preaching, but at the same time, he took advantage of a situation in which the gerontocratic system crashed as a consequence of the war in Congo. Moreover, the resettlement of the former pastor of the Rehoboth Church helped him to “make a career” more quickly: the lack of senior pastors and the resettlement of some of them create favorable conditions for young pastors to assume a position of leadership in the Congolese Pentecostal community.

Through his religious entrepreneurship, Shadrac had the opportunity to “become someone,” and experienced a quick—albeit moderate—upward social mobility, if compared with the common condition of poverty and marginalization Congolese live with in Kampala.

Conclusion

Instead of focusing on the extraordinariness of refugees’ condition, and on religion as an instrument to cope with the displacement experience, this chapter

analyzed the role religious discourses and practices have in the everyday life of Congolese Pentecostals who chose to live in the urban context of Kampala.

Most of them live in “protracted refugee situations.” Hence the need to organize one’s own life in Kampala in a medium-term perspective, trying to navigate amid economic constraints, poor housing conditions, and other daily challenges. In such circumstances, religion can provide a frame to explain the condition of being refugee, narratives that can serve as spiritual guides in daily practices, and also instruments to gain a reputation and to obtain a certain degree of social mobility.

It is from a scrutiny of these everyday contexts and practices that I derived the idea of the need to focus more on lived or everyday religion, rather than on the institutional religious level. In the perspective of the young Congolese Pentecostals I worked with in Kampala, faith is not so much a sequence of norms to follow, but rather a way of looking at things and events, and of relating to other people in everyday life. An ethnographic approach to everyday religious practices and discourses shows how Congolese refugees rely on the official narratives produced by Congolese churches in Kampala and, at the same time, how they negotiate and reformulate them on a daily basis in order to build a meaningful frame through which to reflect on their own experience as refugees and to adapt their narratives to the present situation. As I have shown, this provides refugees with a sense of ordinariness, thus helping them to carry out their everyday lives in a condition of high uncertainty.