

# **Holy Strangers: Transnational Mobility and Moral Empowerment among Evangelical Guineans in Lisbon**

## **Abstract**

In this article, I aim to explore the religious lives of migrants in the African Diaspora by focusing on the case of the Missão Evangélica Lusófona (MEL), a congregation settled in the outskirts of Lisbon and formed by migrants from Guinea-Bissau and other Portuguese-speaking countries. First, I show how, by providing a set of material, social and symbolic benefits, membership of MEL enables believers to cross transnational spaces and creates new spiritual placements in the local environment they inhabit. I then describe the social ecosystem – a neighbourhood on the north-western borders of Lisbon – in which the church is embedded. Finally, I analyse MEL's mission discourses as a narrative of moral empowerment that is in contrast to the stigmatizing representations of African migrants expressed by the established population in this context. In particular, I read these discourses as a form of resistance against power relations inherited from Portugal's colonial past.

**Keywords:** Evangelical Christianity; Bissau-Guinean diaspora; Lisbon; transnationalism; Lusophony

## **Introduction**

In 2011, during a weekly service at the Missão Evangélica Lusófona (hereafter MEL), an African-led church on the outskirts of Lisbon, Pastor Hamesaline Silva was commenting on the Bible episode known as 'The valley of dry bones'. In this passage, the prophet Ezekiel receives a vision of a valley full of dry bones and hears the Lord's voice inciting him to prophesy to them, saying that they will come to life so they would know that He is the Lord (Ezek. 37:1–14). In the pastor's view, these verses were referring to the duty of every Christian to evangelize the society in which they live:

This makes us think about the lives that are without Christ, the lives that do not think about the truth of God, the lives that, from what we know from the Holy Bible, are walking towards condemnation, and are spiritually dead [...]. We have to pray for these lives, pray for this country, pray for this neighbourhood, so that God can also enable us to be worried and intercede in favour of these families. So when we share Ezekiel 37, as a Church of Christ we are like the Prophet at that time, we are those who choose to be used as instruments in the hands of God, to prophesy to people who are spiritually dead, to people who do not know, or do not deal with, or do not want to know God, and we share with them that there is a difference, there is good news, there is a new hope (Pastor Hamesaline Silva, November 2011, Odivelas, translated from Portuguese by the author).

In the last decades, the intensification of migratory flows has led to a growing pluralization of urban religious landscapes in Europe. One particularly relevant aspect of this process has been the spread of Evangelical and Pentecostal churches founded by African migrants, a phenomenon that has contributed to the emergence of new configurations of Christianity in European cities. In the wake of these changes, a burgeoning literature has studied the intersections of religion, migration, transnationalism and locality in the context of African Christianity in the diaspora (e.g. Van Dijk 1997; Ter Haar 1998; Ter Haar 2008; Knibbe 2009; Garbin 2013, 2014). However, most of this scholarship has focused on Northern European contexts, and the emplacement of African-led churches in Southern European cities remains understudied.

As Ramon Sarró and Ruy Blanes (2009) have pointed out, Portugal is an emblematic case of religious encounter between deep-rooted Catholicism and new forms of Christianity hailing from Africa and other areas of the Global South. Although Portugal can still be described, from a religious perspective, as ‘a monolithic country’ (Vilaça 2006) whose national identity is grounded in Catholicism, the arrival of migrants from Africa, South America, Asia and Eastern Europe has contributed to the gradual pluralization of the Portuguese religious field, especially in Greater Lisbon, where most of the migrant population is concentrated. In this area, Pentecostal, neo-Pentecostal and Prophetic churches – attended primarily by migrants from former African colonies and Brazil – have multiplied over the last two decades. As observed

by Sarró and Blanes, this process shows how the ‘ways of the Lord’ are far more tortuous than in the past, when ‘Christianity embarked in Portuguese ports and crossed the Oceans so as to arrive in Africa and America and evangelise the peoples it encountered along the way’. By contrast, today ‘a “southernized” Christianity returns to the place it originally came from, in most cases composed of former colonial subjects that are today postcolonial citizens living with a composite heritage: a global Christianity, a ‘multiple (African, Angolan, Portuguese) belonging’, a migration experience and, finally, a universalising conscience of person, humanity and citizenship’ (Sarró and Blanes 2009: 54).

Returning to the above-mentioned sermon, Pastor Hamesaline’s words bring to the fore a recurrent trope among African Christians in the diaspora: the image of Europe as a valley of dry bones. As stressed by many scholars, African believers refer to their duty to re-evangelize a society that has lost the Gospel way through metaphors like these (Ter Haar 1998; Ter Haar 2008; Van Dijk 1997). And yet, in spite of this widespread rhetoric, several empirical studies on African Christianity in Europe reveal a gap between mission ideals and outcomes (Adogame 2000; Luca 2008; Koning 2009; Fumanti 2010). Trying to explore the reasons why these churches have not proved appealing to Europeans so far, scholars have pointed both to the internal mechanisms within the congregations themselves and to the asymmetric power relations between African believers and the social environment in which they live (Koning 2009; Fumanti 2010; Luca 2008). In the present article, I read such narratives as part of the postcolonial<sup>1</sup> dynamics of African Christianity in Portugal by focusing on the case of the Missão Evangélica Lusófona, an Evangelical congregation located in the northern outskirts of Lisbon and attended by migrants from Guinea-Bissau and other Portuguese-speaking African countries, as well as from Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘postcolonial’ has generated intense debate. According to its critics, the idea of ‘consequentiality’ associated with the suffix ‘post’ can conceal the permanence of colonial relations in the present context of global capitalism, although most of the former colonies have reached formal independence (McClintock 1992; Loomba 2005). As suggested by Robert Young (2001), many of these pitfalls can be solved if ‘postcolonial’ is defined as coming after colonialism, in its original meaning of direct domination, without implying the end of imperialism, understood as the current system of global inequality.

In the first section of this article, I describe the presence of African migrants and Afro-descendants in Greater Lisbon from a postcolonial perspective, drawing attention to the ways in which the lives of former colonial subjects and their children are still influenced by the historical legacy of the Portuguese empire. In the second section, I present an ethnography of MEL. Understanding religious faith as a way for believers to make sense of their experiences of dislocation and re-location, I show how MEL sustains its members in their transnational movements, while enabling them to create a sense of place wherever they end up living. On the one hand, thanks to its transnational connections, the church provides believers who travel from Guinea-Bissau to and across Europe with vital networks and points of reference. On the other, by giving its members day-to-day assistance in all sorts of issues – including spiritual counselling, family mediation and social aid – it helps improve their conditions in everyday life. The third section describes the social environment wherein the church is embedded: the neighbourhood of Vale do Forno, a suburb of so-called ‘illegal origins’ located in the Odivelas district of north-west Lisbon. In the final section, I show how, by involving worshippers in missionary and social work in this neighbourhood, MEL conveys a narrative of moral empowerment that contrasts with the stigmatizing image of the African newcomers held by the earlier-established residents of the area. In particular, I analyse MEL’s mission discourses as a form of resistance against unequal power relations dating back to Portugal’s colonial past.

This contribution is based on fieldwork I conducted from 2010 to 2012 in MEL, including participant observation during services and other church activities, formal interviews and informal conversations with Evangelical leaders and worshippers, local residents and civil officers working in Vale do Forno. Hence, the bulk of my ethnographical data is constituted of both fieldwork notes and recordings of sermons, services and interviews.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All the interviews were conducted in Portuguese.

## Postcolonial encounters in Greater Lisbon

The Portuguese presence in the territory corresponding to Guinea-Bissau dates back to the fifteenth century, when the arrival of Portuguese and Cape Verdean navigators gave rise to coastal centres dedicated to the slave trade and commerce with local groups. People of mixed ancestry born in these Portuguese strongholds gave rise to the Guinean Creole society, who played a central role both in colonial times and in the post-independence (Trajano Filho 2010). For many years, Portuguese influence did not extend beyond coastal areas. It was only in the first decades of the twentieth century that a colonial administration was fully established in the region, through military occupation. However, the Portuguese regime never managed to annihilate local resistance, which rose again during the colonial war (1963–1974), one of the longest and bloodiest in the history of the empire.

Throughout the twentieth century, the colonial administration maintained a system of social and racial inequality, reflected in many fields of social life: in labour relations, organization of space, tax collection, daily interactions, and in the production of racialized subjects. This system of unequal relations was given a legal expression in the *Indigenato* law code – which included the Native Status Law (proclaimed in 1926, revised in 1954 and abolished in 1961) and the Colonial Act (1930) – that divided the population living in Portuguese African colonies into ‘indigenous’ and ‘civilized’. On the basis of this distinction, while the colonizers were ruled by Portuguese legislation, the colonized were excluded from it, remaining under the jurisdiction of local norms, deprived of certain rights and subjected to specific constraints (Alexandre 2005). In 1954, the law was revised with the introduction of a third category – ‘assimilated’. The status of assimilated gave people the right to Portuguese citizenship, but was conditional on compliance with a set of requirements, including speaking, reading and writing in Portuguese, being Christian, having paid employment, dressing in a proper European style and renouncing local customs.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, despite the legal equivalence between Portuguese-born and assimilated citizens, in practice a person’s position in the

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<sup>3</sup> As reported by Tcherno Djaló (2012), these socio-economic and cultural criteria were so strict that, on the eve of colonial war, only 0.4 per cent of the Guinean population was covered by the assimilated status.

colonial social pyramid was determined by racial distinctions. Within this framework, lower ranks were occupied by the indigenous masses, intermediate ranks by mestizo Luso-Guineans and Cape-Verdians, and higher ranks by Portuguese people from the metropolis (Djaló 2012).

The assimilationist review of the *Indigenato* code epitomized a new discourse about national identity and the civilizing mission of Portuguese colonialism that emerged after the Second World War in response to anti-colonial pressures supported by the United Nations. In order to justify the maintenance of Portugal's African colonies in a global context of expanding de-colonization, a whole ideological apparatus had to be mobilized by the Salazar regime. This included the abolition of the Colonial Act in 1951, the re-christening of the colonies as 'Overseas Provinces', and the promotion of the image of Portugal as a pluriracial and pluricontinental nation. In public discourse, the lusotropicalist doctrine was the main tool used by the regime to justify the continued possession of its colonies. Reinterpreting the Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre's argument for the supposed disposition of the Portuguese to engage in racial and cultural mixing in tropical lands, this narrative described Portugal as the author of an exemplary kind of colonialism, marked by miscegenation, cultural hybridity and cordiality towards the coloured races. In using lusotropicalism to promote its international and domestic propaganda, the government conveyed the idea of Portuguese exceptionalism, thus concealing the persistence of colonial violence and racial hierarchies throughout the empire (Almeida 2002; Reiter 2005; Domingos and Peralta 2013).

In 1974, colonial wars in Guinea-Bissau, Angola and Mozambique contributed to the overthrow of the authoritarian regime in Portugal. In the following two years, the Portuguese colonies became independent. With the loss of its overseas domains, Portugal turned its focus to Europe. The country's entrance into the European Union in 1986 initiated a period of economic growth, the renewal of infrastructure, an increase in international relations, and the transition of the country from being one of emigration to one of immigration. Since the 1980s, the growth of the Portuguese economy has attracted increasing flows of migrants from Africa, Latin America, Asia and Eastern Europe, which supply the low-skilled sectors of the labour market. This re-orientation entailed a reformulation of Portuguese national identity. The imperial narrative of Portugal as a pluricontinental nation was relinquished and a new project associating Portuguese modernity with Europeanness and difference from the non-European world (Reiter 2005;

Almeida 2002) grew in its place. The orientation towards Europe also had important consequences for the legal definition of Portuguese citizenship. In 1975, a decree proclaimed the loss of Portuguese nationality for all the inhabitants of the former colonies, with the exception of citizens born in Portugal and their descendants (the so-called *retornados*, 'returnees'). In 1981, a new law changed the rules of naturalization to define Portuguese citizenship in terms of origin and descent, on the basis of the principle of *ius sanguinis* rather than *ius solis* (Reiter 2005). Furthermore, in order to conform to EU immigration policies, subsequent legal measures limited the entry of migrants and residence permits were subsequently linked to work contracts.

The collapse of the Portuguese empire, the integration of Portugal into the European Union and the following reconfiguration of national identity did not obliterate the Portuguese colonial past. On the contrary, the colonial relations that marked the history of the empire outlived the end of actual colonization, re-emerging in current institutions, practices and representations (Domingos and Peralta 2013). Like elsewhere in Europe, 'colonial legacies' (De l'Étoile 2008) are still structuring contemporary Portugal, being embodied in material culture and urban landscapes, as well as in the circulation of commodities, images and people. In particular, colonial relations continue to inform policies, discourses and daily interactions involving migrants from former Portuguese colonies and their descendants.

Despite the recent diversification in the national origins of migrants, African post-colonial migration still represents the largest stream in Portugal: Cape-Verdeans, Angolans and Guineans account for the second, the fourth and the sixth largest foreign groups, respectively (INE 2012). Today, the lives of African migrants and Afro-descendants continue to be conditioned by power relations that can be traced back to the colonial past. Firstly, in complying with European immigration policies, Portugal introduced a bifurcation in citizenship statuses that reproduces the colonial division between 'citizens' and 'subjects' (Mamdani 1996; Mezzadra 2006; Sarró and Mapril 2011). As has been observed, the institution of the Schengen space – in which EU citizens have certain rights from which non-EU citizens are excluded – reveals a process of re-colonization of migration that turns 'non-EU foreigners' into second-class citizens. The result is a plurality of citizenship statuses on a continuum from 'illegal migrants' to 'EU citizens' wherein one has access to certain rights and not to others, depending on specific legal conditions. Hence, by conforming to the European

paradigm and re-labelling former imperial subjects as non-EU foreigners, Portuguese migration laws replicate the old distinction between 'indigenous' and 'civilized'.

Secondly, the lack of citizenship rights to which many African migrants are subject translates into a radical process of marginalization, evident in their precarious conditions in terms of housing, health and education, as well as in their concentration in the lower sectors of the labour market. Portuguese colonial legacies are particularly evident in the urban segregation of African migrants, especially in the area of Greater Lisbon, where much of the population from former colonies is concentrated. African migrants have settled there since the late 1970s, living in suburban slums and working in badly paid jobs, such as domestic service and construction. As observed by Eduardo Ascensão, the growth of informal settlements in Greater Lisbon in the 1970s–1990s reflects the existence of a 'colonial/post-colonial spectre' (Ascensão 2013). On the one hand, the lack of access to proper housing and urban infrastructure reveals the persistence of inequality and the subaltern status of the former colonized with regard to the Portuguese state. On the other, the concentration of African migrants in post-colonial slums replicates, in the former metropolis, the regimes of spatial segregation that marked Portuguese colonial cities.

Finally, besides being reproduced in legal, social and urban discrimination, colonial relations continue to inform the post-colonial present in the field of daily interactions in that the racial classification system underlying the opposition 'indigenous/civilized' influences the relationship between African migrants and white Portuguese population. As shown by Jorge Vala and others (Vala, Brito, and Lopes 1999), the enduring influence of the lusotropicalist ideology – according to which the Portuguese colonial history is marked by cultural hybridism and racial mixture – contributes to the persistence of racism in Portuguese society. However, despite anti-racist norms supporting public censorship of flagrant racism, subtle forms of racism and racist beliefs are commonplace in Portugal, where they are organized in ways similar to those seen in other European countries.

And yet, the replication in the former metropolis of social barriers and symbolic categories dating back to colonial times does not occur in a linear way. Rather it is often subjected to various forms of contestation, which do not necessarily take the form of open political protest (Domingos and Peralta 2013). In the following pages, I will show how resistance is emerging in the symbolic sphere in the form of counter-



narratives able to combat long-standing structures of discrimination and labelling and in the production of critical representations of the larger society. By focusing on the case of MEL, I will describe how a narrative of moral empowerment is being produced in the religious field, enabling African Christians to cope with their marginal condition through a discourse of redemption.

### **The Missão Evangélica Lusófona**

The Missão Evangélica Lusófona was founded in 2002 by Eliseu Gomes, a minister of Guinean origins, together with a small group of African believers. Eliseu was born into a family of Evangelical faith in Bissau. He arrived in Lisbon in 1994 with the idea of bringing spiritual support to his fellow citizens living in Europe. There he received theological training and was consecrated as a pastor in a local Bible institute. Meanwhile, Eliseu attended various Evangelical churches, finally joining a congregation belonging to the Portuguese branch of the Church of God (hereafter COG) – an international Pentecostal denomination with headquarters in the USA. In this period, he noticed that many African Christians were not able to integrate into local congregations, as they did not feel welcomed by their brothers in faith:

Many people ended up not going to church because of this situation [...]. Even when I got here I felt this very strongly. When I entered [a church near my home], the pastor received me very well. I had that hunger, that desire to have friends, because when I left Guinea I left thousands of friends, so when I came here I just wanted to make friends. For us, there in Bissau, when a new person come, we give full attention to that person, and I thought it was so in Portugal as well. But when I entered the church I was sitting on the bench, and people went ahead and did not stay with me. After the service they all fled. Every day after the worship I stayed alone (Pastor Eliseu Gomes, February 2012, Odivelas, translated from Portuguese by the author).

In order to create a warmer environment, Eliseu started to assemble a group of believers of African origin, mostly from Guinea-Bissau. They held prayer groups in private homes until they received permission from COG to establish a new congregation. Eliseu's plan was to meet the spiritual and social needs of the Guinean

Evangelical community, as well as to carry out missionary activity among migrant families and the established population. With this in mind, the founding members decided to set up their place of worship in Vale do Forno, a neighbourhood of so-called 'illegal genesis' on the north-western outskirts of Lisbon. Here, African citizens were cohabitating with migrants from Brazil, Asia and Eastern Europe, as well as older residents from the interior of Portugal. Although their evangelization project was primarily directed to African families, it was intended to involve the local community as a whole. Yet, as I will illustrate later, the main audience for the church became the African and the Brazilian community, whereas missionary activity directed at older residents has so far been unsuccessful.

In a short time, the congregation grew conspicuously. Affiliation with COG allowed MEL to obtain legal status and recognition from the Portuguese state, as well as giving it access to a global network of congregations. However, MEL's connections extend beyond denomination borders. Firstly, Pastor Eliseu has kept ties with several churches located in his homeland. He regularly invites Guinean pastors to preach in Vale do Forno and himself travels to Bissau, where he has implanted a COG branch. Secondly, he is connected with other African churches in the diaspora, especially those associated with Guinean migratory movements in countries like France, Belgium and the UK. Thirdly, he maintains relationships with other churches in Lisbon frequented by African believers. Besides facilitating the mobility of religious leaders, such transnational networks provide members moving abroad with important points of reference. For instance, when a believer moves to another country, they are given a recommendation letter, a sort of safe-conduct to be delivered to the minister of the church whose congregation they want to join. Such networks are vital in religious communities like MEL, where members are particularly exposed to unemployment and labour vulnerability, leading to temporary or permanent mobility in the search for work. By offering its congregants shelters and familiar spaces, MEL's transnational connections help them to deal with an uncertain future.

At the time of my fieldwork, membership of MEL was around one hundred. However, the size of the church has undergone great fluctuations that reflect the transient nature of this migrant community. In addition, the economic crisis that has affected Portugal since 2010 has furthered the turnover of worshippers.

While many believers are currently re-migrating to Northern Europe<sup>4</sup> in search of job opportunities, they are being replaced by newcomers who constantly arrive from Guinea-Bissau, driven by persistent political and economic instability. The congregation has a predominantly Guinean membership, but other Portuguese-speaking African countries – such as São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola and Cape Verde - as well as Brazil, are also represented. Many of the congregation's young members were born in Portugal to African parents. In terms of class structure, the church is formed by a majority of low-class migrants who work in unskilled or precarious jobs or are unemployed; a minority of middle-class migrants, mostly employed in the service sector; and a large group of young students. As regards their legal status, many MEL members have a temporary residence permit, while several are undocumented and others have a visa for health reasons. Only a few of them are holders of Portuguese nationality, even among those young people born in Portugal. Though many believers live in Vale do Forno and its surroundings, other members are settled in more distant suburbs. Among the Guinean worshippers, their bond with MEL generally started before migration as many of them were members of the Missão Evangélica de Belém, the congregation to which Pastor Eliseu belonged when he lived in Bissau. Two dynamics of participation are therefore in action: one territorial, the other based in personal social networks.

In 2012, Pastor Eliseu married S., a Brazilian member of the church. The marriage between Eliseu and S. enhanced Brazilian participation in the church, as many of the bride's relatives joined the congregation. Inter-marriage between members of different nationalities is a recurrent pattern in the church, where it is consistent with the leadership's insistence on overcoming particular identities and emphasizing belonging to the universal Christian community. At the same time, inter-marriage appears as a strategy for creating alliances between the different groups within the church, as well as enabling the congregation to enlarge its audience beyond the boundaries of the Guinean community. More generally, Pastor Eliseu's marriage sheds light on a crucial point: as evidenced by the fact that many congregants are kin of the founders and most visitors and new converts are relatives of MEL's members, kinship seems to be a central channel of evangelization and a way to create connections in the wider society.

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<sup>4</sup> Mostly the United Kingdom, but also France, Belgium and Germany.

MEL's organization reproduces the classic Evangelical pattern. The main pastor, the general secretary and the presbytery occupy the highest hierarchical levels. At the time of my fieldwork, Pastor Eliseu was assisted by two co-pastors, who substituted for him in his absence: Pastor Carlos, an elderly Portuguese minister of COG, and Pastor Hamesaline, born in São Tomé and Príncipe and one of MEL's founders. The General Assembly consists of all the baptized members, while the intermediate level is formed of seven departments, each dedicated to specific activities and guided by a leader: women, men, young people, children, mission, music, and social area.

As attested by the church's name, the language of worship is Portuguese. Nevertheless, Kriol and the ethnic idioms of Guinea-Bissau are also spoken in several settings, such as at choir, praise, prayers and in informal conversations. In prayer, coherent with Pentecostal doctrine and practice, speaking in tongues<sup>5</sup> is performed, but not by everyone. As a matter of fact, a plurality of modes of devotion coexists in the church: while believers who converted in Portugal seem more influenced by Pentecostal styles, members who developed their faith in Guinea-Bissau show a greater affinity with classical Protestant spirituality<sup>6</sup>. Nonetheless, speaking in tongues is actively transmitted during the preparation process leading to baptism, which includes bible training and regular participation in weekly services in the months before baptism.

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<sup>5</sup> The practice of 'speaking in tongues', or 'glossolalia', is one of the distinguishing features of Pentecostalism. It comprises a range of phenomena, such as speaking in unknown languages and pronounce verbal declamations in a state of emotional and religious excitement, aimed at achieving a direct communication with God beyond the limits of verbal language. The doctrine of glossolalia finds its theological ground in the Bible episode of Pentecost, in which the Holy Spirit offered his gifts, or *charismata* – including speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing and miracles – to the apostles and the assembled crowd.

<sup>6</sup> Until recent times, Evangelical Christianity was a minority religion in Guinea-Bissau, a country where the majority of the population prevalently practised Islam, local religions and, to a lesser extent, Catholicism. However, Evangelical churches have experienced a strong increase since the 1990s, when a large number of denominations coming mostly from Brazil, but also from the United States, Nigeria and Ghana, began to carry out missionary activity in the country. While older churches refer to conservative models, which were transmitted by early missionaries of Methodist and Baptist background, new churches are mostly of Pentecostal inspiration (Formenti 2017).

Following the Evangelical tradition, MEL practises adult baptism in water. In the case of individuals belonging to Evangelical families, baptism commonly takes place during adolescence. Baptism of new converts occurs once a year in summertime, when the community goes to the estuary of a river south of Lisbon.

MEL's place of worship is a former warehouse on the ground floor of a three-storey building located in a side street. The frontage consists of a large glass door with an aluminium frame and no signage. Without the posters promoting events organized by the congregation, the church would not be easily recognizable from the outside. However, neighbours know it is there because its choirs can be heard from outside almost every day. Activities take place in the place of worship every day except Monday, which is the day of rest. In addition to the Sunday service, worship is held from Tuesday to Thursday, Friday evening is dedicated to Bible study, and Saturday is devoted to band practice, the activities of the social action group, meetings, workshops on specific topics, and other special events.

Outside the hours of worship, the pastor and the most active members, particularly those of the mission department, often visit and hold prayer meetings in the homes of believers who request them. If needed, they also visit people in hospitals and prisons. Their aim is to give members spiritual support in times of personal crisis, such as illness, the death of a relative or the loss of a job. Sometimes they take food, clothes and the Word of God to the houses of needy neighbours. Every year, evangelization campaigns are held in the local area, featuring gospel concerts and the distribution of flyers and pamphlets.

Since the beginning, one of the MEL's main vocations has been to give material and spiritual assistance to migrant families living in the area, with a special calling to work with African descendants. According to Pastor Hamesaline (interview, March 2011, Odivelas), the children of migrants are particularly exposed to risk of school dropout, drug use and involvement in petty crime. In his view, the reason for this fragility is twofold. On the one hand, it is the outcome of their feeling of social exclusion. As a matter of fact, due to legal restrictions on naturalization, African descendants are doomed to remain as foreigners in the land in which they were born. On the other hand, their risky behaviours result from a lack of back-up at home in terms of discipline, emotional care and school support, which is a result of their parents either working long hours or being absent altogether, having had to find work elsewhere. Eliseu's personal commitment to the youth in his congregation takes multiple forms. Firstly, he tries to 'give value to their talents', as he often

says, especially through music. Secondly, he seeks to find solutions to their problems in the matters of legal documents, housing, and scholarships. Finally, he acts as a mediator in family conflicts. In other words, he proposes himself as a 'surrogate family head' (Van Dijk 1997: 148), giving day-to-day assistance in all sorts of issues and penetrating deep into the private lives of his young congregants. In the view of Pastor Eliseu (interview, April 2011, Odivelas), many of the young people who came to the church presenting 'deviant' behaviours have changed their conduct and acquired a 'Christian lifestyle'.

Social engagement with young people, especially those of African descent, is also the mission of the social action department. In 2005, this group established the Associação Comunidade Lusófona (henceforth ACL), an association directed by Hamesaline Silva and officially recognized by the council. ACL's activities include school support, leisure activities – such as excursions and summer stays – and material aid for children of members as well as needy families living in Vale do Forno and surroundings. On the one hand, ACL was set up to promote a relationship with the local administration in order to access public funding; since the finances of the church are largely based on tithes and contributions from members, resources are too low to support social work. Although monetary support has so far been quite limited, Odivelas council sustains the association by offering free transport for excursions and spiritual retreats, spaces for special meetings and, occasionally, food aid. On the other hand, ACL is the official face of the church in its relationship with local authorities, responding to a need for public recognition. In the words of David Garbin, the commitment of the church in maintaining a relationship with local institutions reflects its 'need to engage with the 'post-secular' dimension of contemporary urban societies' (Garbin 2013: 678).

## **Vale do Forno**

Like other suburbs in the area, Vale do Forno grew through a process of informal construction, which took place over the final three decades of the twentieth century. The area was first occupied in the 1970s, by a group of working-class people from the interior of Portugal, who were employed in the industry and construction sectors. These early settlers, who now own most of the housing stock, built their houses according to their own taste and abilities, creating over time a heterogeneous conglomeration. Due to the

presence of vegetable gardens and vacant lots, Vale do Forno is a quiet place with a countryside feel, but it lacks infrastructure, social services, shops, and, often, structurally safe buildings. Geological surveys have also defined the area as one of low geotechnical security, due to its pronounced slopes. In 2009, in an attempt to address the problems of urban, social and geological decay, the local council began work on an urban renewal plan aimed at legalizing the whole area, including five adjacent conglomerations. The project included the demolition of almost 200 houses at risk of collapse, the subsequent relocation of inhabitants, the creation of social facilities, and the implementation of infrastructure works. In the last few years some of this work has been completed, but many of the initiatives remain unfinished because of a lack of public resources and conflicts with local landlords.

During the 1990s, the social structure of the local community changed dramatically. Following a general trend in Greater Lisbon, a foreign population – including migrants from African countries, Brazil, Eastern Europe, India and Pakistan – settled in the area, attracted to the area by relatively low rents. The original residents remained in their houses as owners, the newcomers became their tenants. As a result, from that moment a new ‘established-outsiders configuration’ (Elias and Scotson 1994) emerged in Vale do Forno, marked by the presence of two social groups: Portuguese landlords and migrant tenants. By virtue of their earlier arrival, their greater cohesion, as well as their status as landlords and national citizens, older families have acquired greater power in comparison to the newcomers, have better incomes and maintain closer relationships with local authorities.

This social configuration is reflected in many fields. First, it has a spatial dimension: while the lower areas and the best-quality dwellings tend to be inhabited by Portuguese owners, the higher lands and the more degraded houses are mostly occupied by migrants. Second, it is reproduced in the sphere of religion. Catholicism is the prevalent faith within the neighbourhood, especially among Portuguese-born residents, and is particularly visible in the urban space because of the presence of a Catholic chapel, images of saints in doorways, and a procession dedicated to the Virgin Mary that takes place in May. Nonetheless, the increasing presence of a migrant population has contributed to the gradual pluralization of the local religious landscape. In the last two decades, a Sikh meeting house attended by Indian migrants has been established in the area, as well as two churches frequented by African believers: the Lisbon branch of the Tokoist Church (Sarró and

Blanes 2009; Blanes 2011) and the MEL. Third, this social segmentation is reflected in the moral domain. Due to their status as national citizens, their internal integration, their compliance with common norms, and their superiority in power terms, the old residents think of themselves as ethically better than the newcomers – a belief that is reflected in stigmatizing talks against the outsiders. In the stereotyped representations of landlords, the migrant-tenant group is held as a unified whole, marked by a combination of negative features, such as arrogance, laziness, involvement in illegal activity, and so on. Furthermore, in relation to those coming from former African colonies, these representations appear to be influenced by the historical legacy of the Portuguese empire and marked by both open and disguised forms of racism.

For African Christians, I would suggest that religion is a key resource amongst the newcomers, enabling them to react to social exclusion and to build a self-image free from stigma. In this sense, besides being an 'objective expression of social status', religious belonging is a reflection of 'symbolic and moral positionalities' in the Vale do Forno environment (Garbin 2013: 692). Indeed, religious faith enables MEL members to tell a counter-story about their presence in Vale do Forno, which is in contrast to the landlords' narratives and helps them to counter stigmatization through a discourse of redemption.

### **The mission at the margins**

To explore the ways in which MEL's believers are producing counter-narratives able to combat the offensive labels imposed on them by their more-established neighbours, let us return to the vignette at the beginning of this article. Referring to Ezekiel's vision, Pastor Hamesaline described Vale do Forno, and by extension the entire country, as a spiritual desert, and he impelled his flock to prophesy to people who are spiritually dead so that they will know the 'Good News'. As has been observed, images of Europe as a 'Christian cemetery' (Blanes 2008) are recurrent tropes among African Christians in the diaspora. Through these metaphors, African believers depict themselves as carrying out a universal task: an evangelizing mission to a European society that, in their view, has lost the Gospel way (Ter Haar 1998; Ter Haar 2008; Van Dijk 1997). Reflecting on these narratives, scholars have described the proliferation of African churches in the diaspora as a form of 'reversed mission': it represents the desire to re-evangelize Europe by those who were formerly



evangelized by European missionaries. However, the idea of a reversed mission has been criticized for being Eurocentric, as it implies the idea of a 'standard' path of mission that could be 'reversed' (Koning 2009). In this sense, the notion of reversed mission hints at movement from the periphery to the centre. However, as many scholars have pointed out, in recent times the centre of gravity of Christianity has shifted from North to South, with a rise in the number of conversions and the presence of Christians in the public space in Africa and South America (Jenkins 2006).

Although the notion of reversed mission has been questioned, the idea that African Christians have a mission to re-evangelize European societies remains a widespread rhetoric in many African-led churches. And yet, several empirical studies on African Christianity in Europe have shown that these churches have not appealed to Europeans until now, revealing a gap between mission ideals and outcomes (Adogame 2000; Luca 2008; Koning 2009; Fumanti 2010). Scholars have identified three key factors that explain the apparent gap between discourse and praxis in this context. First, in contrast with the reversed mission narrative, it has been shown that the actual evangelizing practices of many African-led churches are structured in terms of specific languages, cultural features, social needs and social networks. The choice of a language of worship other than the idiom spoken in the wider society, the inclination to carry out evangelization within kinship networks, and the provision of social services that are highly specific to a migrant population – such as legal counselling and organization of transnational marriages and funerals – all contribute to encapsulation and ethnic particularism within the congregations (Koning 2009; Fumanti 2010; Luca 2008). Second, mission ideals may in fact have less of an actual purpose, being rather a function of identity construction. Stressing the duty to re-evangelize Europe, these discourses depict African Christians as carriers of an authentic form of Christianity by defining them in contrast to a secularized European world (Koning 2009). Third, asymmetric power relations between African believers and the social environment in which they live and operate create strong barriers to any missionary activity targeting the established population (Koning 2009). These reflections should be held less as alternative explanatory models than as working hypothesis, which must be tested by ethnographic research attentive to the specific features of religious communities, as well as to peculiar historical and local circumstances. Despite the apparent failure of its missionary attempts towards Europeans, MEL's national makeup is quite heterogeneous, comprising a majority of Guinean churchgoers

together with a growing minority of worshippers from other African countries, as well as from Brazil. Besides studying its mission strategy and its internal social dynamics, it is useful to analyse MEL's relationship with social actors in the local environment in order to understand the ineffectiveness of MEL among the older residents and its success among migrants and their descendants.

MEL's evangelization project is primarily expressed in its name, insofar as the concept of 'Lusophony' refers to an explicit missionary strategy. Despite the existence of linguistic pluralism within the congregation, the official language of worship is Portuguese. By stressing the common background of both 'established' and 'outsiders', the choice of Lusophony seems to reveal a desire to overcome cultural and social barriers and reach the wider society. Furthermore, a number of MEL's strategies are directed at incorporating non-Guinean members within the congregation: evangelizing campaigns in the area, mission visits to needy neighbours, and the practice of intermarriage. It is worth noting that, unlike what has been observed in other African-led churches in the diaspora, the case of MEL shows how kinship ties may become powerful tools for cultural crossover, and a means by which to overcome social and cultural boundaries. Recent scholarship on African Christianity in Europe has associated the 'ethnic' or cultural uniformity of many African congregations with the obvious fact that evangelization runs along kinship networks (Koning 2009; Luca 2008). According to these authors, as places of worship are only open to non-believers on certain occasions, mostly life-cycle celebrations such as baptisms and marriages, opportunities for interaction with non-Christians are necessarily restricted to kin and fellow citizens. In MEL's case, by contrast, the preference for intermarriage between members of different nationalities appears as a means of expanding the scope of evangelization to non-Guinean citizens, on the assumption that – as is often stressed in preaching – any new convert is 'a spiritual receptacle able to bring other members of her or his family to the church'. So on the one hand, the value assigned to intermarriage can be connected with the universalist Christian ideology that stresses the importance of overcoming particular identities in order to join the global community in Christ. On the other, the practice reproduces a common pattern found in Guinea-Bissau. There, long-standing historical processes generated intercultural, interethnic and interracial dynamics, whereby differences were accommodated by means of religious and kinship connections, resulting in a high degree of ethnic plurality and processes of creolization, both in rural and urban environments (Trajano Filho 2010; Brooks 1993, 2003). In MEL, this

West-African ability to accommodate difference and create social connections contributed to the emergence of a heterogeneous environment, where multiple identities are bound together by the use of Portuguese language and by a common faith in Christ. In these particular circumstances, 'cultural' features do not seem to result in 'ethnic' segregation. On the contrary, universalist Christian discourses and West-African kinship patterns have merged to domesticate and incorporate differences within a pluralistic migrant community.

Yet, the church has not proved to be very appealing to old residents, as few landlords have joined the church so far. The absence of Portuguese neighbours in the church could be ascribed to the enduring predominance of Catholicism among older residents. However, Evangelical Portuguese-born believers are not absent from the surroundings of Vale do Forno, but they prefer to congregate in local churches where the prevalent membership is Portuguese. In my opinion, the failure of MEL's mission to evangelize the established population should be associated less with unchanging and fixed religious identities than with the distrust felt by those older inhabitants towards a religious community that is perceived as culturally and socially distinct. As illustrated in the previous paragraph, in the eyes of Portuguese-born inhabitants, MEL believers are viewed as outsiders and implicitly inferior in moral terms. The stigmatizing discourses of landlords towards migrant tenants were clearly perceived by my interlocutors, who often complained about the racist attitude of white Portuguese neighbours. On the one hand, this racism is an outcome of the power asymmetry between first and new comers in the local environment, where both social and racial boundaries between established and outsiders are constantly maintained. On the other, as noted above, it is a consequence of long-standing structures of dominance, surviving in the former metropolis despite the end of the empire. In the words of Ann Stoler (2008), it reveals how 'imperial debris continues to inform the interactions between ex-colonizers and ex-colonized in post-colonial cities.

The limits of MEL's missionary activity bring to light the ambivalences in the notion of Lusophony, which is not only a linguistic common ground for many people living around the Atlantic Ocean, but is also the outcome of enduring asymmetrical relations between Portugal and its former colonies (Sarró and Blanes 2009). As suggested by Miguel Vale de Almeida, by emphasizing the cultural domain and concealing the violence inherent in Portuguese colonial history, the notion of Lusophony appears as a post-colonial version of the lusotropicalist narrative. By stressing the Portuguese gift and rejecting the African counter-gift, both

discourses imply that culture, and especially language, is 'something given to others by Portugal', and 'rarely the other way around' (Almeida 2002: 198). In fact, despite the praise for cultural mixture, legal, social and racial barriers are constantly reproduced in contemporary Portugal.

Yet, in spite of the failure of MEL's outreach mission among its Portuguese neighbours, I would suggest that mission ideals perform a function of 'moral empowerment' among MEL believers. Stressing the duty to re-evangelize Europe, these discourses depict African Christians as carriers of an authentic form of Christianity by defining them in contrast to Portuguese 'idolater' Catholicism and barren secularism. Indeed, the idea that believers were guided from their country of origin by divine providence, in order to evangelize a spiritually dead people, enhances their moral authority while making sense of their stories of migration. This counter-narrative of spiritual primacy reverses the stigmatizing representations that are commonplace among old residents. By representing Vale do Forno as a land that should be won back for Jesus, African believers express a rhetoric of 'moral renewal' (Garbin 2013: 684) that turns upside down the 'imperial mystic' of Portuguese expansionism, which assumed that the improvement of African populations depended on the 'moral influence' exerted by Portuguese colonizers (Domingos and Peralta 2013: xvii). Furthermore, by prophesying that the Christian regeneration of Europe will come from African migrants living in marginal urban places, Evangelical Guinean Christians are expressing a 'theology of marginality' that places themselves at the centre of a new spiritual geography (Sarró and Mélice 2010). Within this 'spiritual mapping' (Fanello and Mary 2010), MEL's place of worship becomes a crucial point of reference. By transforming a former warehouse into a church, MEL's believers have created a counter-space where visions of alternative social spaces can take form. It is a space similar to what Foucault (2001) has called 'heterotopy', a kind of effectively realized utopia in which the surrounding area is simultaneously represented, contested and overturned (Garbin 2014). A place that has been cleared of the influence of Catholic 'idols', and where images of saints have been replaced by African choirs. A sacred space where a counter-story of regeneration can be told, and where people may enter as a migrant and exit as a missionary.

## Conclusion

As suggested by Peter van der Veer (2002), migrant religious communities in today's postcolonial cities are developing alternative forms of cosmopolitanism, grounded on discursive traditions other than the secular European Enlightenment. Such 'alternative cosmopolitanisms' constitute creative understandings of the social environment where migrant believers live, involving engagements with established populations and making sense of their experiences of dislocation and relocation from a religious perspective.

The members of the Missão Evangélica Lusófona make sense of their diasporic experience by joining a cosmopolitan congregation formed of migrants from Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, Angola, Cape-Verde and Brazil, who are bound together by religious faith, kinship ties, and a shared use of the Portuguese language. Through their affiliation, MEL believers reinterpret and take seriously the creole utopia of cohabitation, miscegenation and cultural mixture that is inherent to the contemporary cultural and political project of Lusophony, which can be understood as a postcolonial reinterpretation of the old lusotropicalist narrative. However, whilst MEL's mission practice operates in a lusophone space, it contributes to the creation of a Lusophony without Portuguese-born people. As a matter of fact, while mission activity has been successful in gaining the souls of migrant residents, few Portuguese neighbours have joined the church. In the previous paragraphs, I attributed the failure of these missionary efforts to the distrust felt by older inhabitants towards a community of newer outsiders, who are perceived both as socially distinct and implicitly inferior in moral terms.

In this article, I described MEL as an emblematic example of how Evangelical Christianity sustains African migrants as they move around, while concurrently enabling them to create a sense of place in the localities they inhabit. By offering a network of transnational connections, as well as a set of material, social and symbolic benefits, membership of MEL helps migrant believers to deal with everyday difficulties and make sense of the world in which they live. Furthermore, by turning its members from migrants into missionaries in a heathen land, MEL's mission discourses and practices produce a form of moral empowerment, reversing the stigmatizing labels pronounced by the older residents of Vale do Forno. Simultaneously, by portraying the established population as a spiritually dead people, such narratives

constitute a critical gaze directed at a hostile social environment (Riccio 2004). As I have tried to show, these moral judgments can be understood as a form of resistance against power relations inherited from the Portuguese colonial past. The colonial distinction between 'indigenous' and 'civilized' is constantly reproduced in contemporary Portugal, to the extent that many African migrants remain in a state of lack of rights and reduced citizenship, being subjected to stigmatization and social marginalization. By contrast, mission rhetoric and the social engagement of the church in the local environment contribute to create a model of 'virtuous citizenship' (Fumanti 2010), fostering a sense of moral superiority in relation to Portuguese society among congregants, regardless of their legal status and social marginality.

The downside of this experience is that the contestation of postcolonial forms of domination is limited to the religious and symbolic sphere and does not lead to open political claims. Hence, despite providing African Christians with a moral shield against discrimination, exploitation and exclusion, these counter-representations do not lead to change in the existing state of things. The upside is the empowering effects of this religious experience in the lives of believers, evident in the interweaving of social and symbolic capital that enables them to deal with a life in motion, as well as to inhabit and reshape the urban space where they dwell.

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