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Garbin, David (2018) Sacred remittances: money, migration and the moral economy of development in a transnational African church. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* . ISSN 1369-183X.

DOI

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1433528>

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JOURNAL OF ETHNIC AND MIGRATION STUDIES, 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1433528>

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1369183X.2018.1433528>

Sacred remittances: money, migration and the moral economy of development in a transnational African church

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ABSTRACT

While remittances have come to play an important part in debates about migration and development, the link between religion, migration and transnational financial flows has yet to be understood in its full complexity. Drawing upon a multi-sited ethnography of a transnational African church, this article addresses this overlooked dimension of migrant transnationalism by analysing how religious donations converted into 'sacred remittances' produce a moral economy of religious life shaped by a politics of belongings at various scales. The article discusses the social meaning that diasporic actors attach to religious donations sent to the homeland (the Congo) and how this compares to the practice of sending remittances to family members. The article also argues that transnational circulation of sacralised money operates within a field of meanings and practices associated with moral expectations, entitlements and differentiated regimes of value. Sacred remittances, as 'global money', may generate a diversity of transnational linkages between donors and recipients but they remain embedded in landscapes of status and power.

Introduction

In recent years, migrants have sent approximately 400 billion dollars annually in remittances to their family members in developing countries (World Bank 2016). Unsurprisingly, given the sheer scale and volume of this monetary flow, remittances have come to play an important part in debates about transnationalism, migration and development (De Haas 2005; Kapur 2004; Kelegama 2011). In addition to their transformative socio-economic impact, remittances have become, as Guarnizo argues, 'the most visible evidence

and measuring stick for the ties connecting migrants with their societies of origin' (2003, 666).

However, while (re)creating proximity, remittances can also produce social distance between groups on both sides of the migration divide (Waldinger 2015). Tensions thus often result from the conversion of remittances into symbolic capital, conferring a newly prestigious status on migrants and their kin, a status often open to contestation especially when challenging established norms of authority and power, as shown by the pioneering work of Gardner (1995). Her ethnography describes how nouveau riche migrant families from Sylhet, Bangladesh, can be perceived as short-circuiting various local hierarchies, for instance, through 'reinvented' religious respectability (*izaat*), acquired through the construction of mosques or lavish offerings.

Gardner is among the few scholars to have examined the intersecting issues of remittances, migration and religious change in the homeland context. In this article, I draw upon a multi-sited ethnography of a transnational African church to explore these links by focusing on the flow of religious capital from diaspora to homeland. Through this case study, I analyse how religious donations converted into 'sacred remittances' produce a moral economy of transnational religious life, shaped by a diasporic politics of belongings on both local and global scales.

While the politics of religious space and identity among Pentecostals, Catholics and Kimbanguists (members of a large Christian prophetic church, see below) have been an important focus of my protracted work among Congolese communities over the years (see Garbin 2013, 2014), in this article I mainly draw upon data collected among Kimbanguist church members through semi-structured interviews and participant observation in religious and non-religious settings. The research was mostly undertaken in the U.K. but also comprised fieldwork in the U.S. and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as part of a project exploring the religious aspects of development and gift-giving.¹ As a non-Kimbanguist (however ethnographically 'integrated') outsider, my initial concern was that money would be a sensitive topic to discuss. However, money is far from being taboo among Kimbanguists, and in its cash form, it is of high ritualistic importance. In fact, many of my informants took a lot of pride in emphasising how their large collective donations reflected a spirit of solidarity and how their 'sacred remittances' contributed to the 'development' of both the church and the homeland. Thus most were quite open and willing to share their views, including on more controversial issues such as conflicts over money within the church. By travelling and sojourning

with Kimbanguist migrants during my fieldwork in the DRC, I could also closely observe not only how they ‘practised’ and interpreted sacred donations and religious development in the homeland context, but also how they navigated the moral economy of remittances and gift-giving among non-migrant friends and relatives – in particular in Kinshasa. I was exposed, in other words, to the multiple dynamics and tensions at work within what we could call a wider transnational moral economy of development. This proved to be useful in my analysis since, as we shall see, informants often compared and contrasted the ‘spirit’ of transnational religious donations with the practice of sending remittances to kin in the homeland.

While it exhibits certain features that are similar to other African Christian churches, Pentecostal in particular, the Kimbanguist church constitutes a unique case study, due in part to a strong prophetic legacy centred around the figure of Simon Kimbangu, who in 1921 began a ministry of faith healing in Belgian-ruled Congo. While for most Pentecostals the adoption of a born-again identity involves a radical break with an ancestral past of spiritual bondage, among Kimbanguists, tradition is reworked through the locus of a prophetic imaginary bridging past and future, creating strong continuities between prophetic time-spaces spanning generations. Another feature unique to the Kimbanguist church is the role played by Nkamba, the birthplace of the prophet-founder Kimbangu, and the spiritual centre of the church in the DRC. Nkamba is simultaneously a spiritual axis mundi, an administrative headquarters, and the ‘New Jerusalem’ in Africa where, according to Kimbanguist prophecies, ‘all nations will gather’ (Isaiah 66). Contributing to the development of the Holy City through volunteer work or donations is considered a sacred duty, believed to bring both spiritual and material blessings, or *mapamboli*.

By exploring the moral economy of sacred remittances sent to Nkamba in the DRC, one of my aims is to study how religious understandings of ‘development’ hinge on the making and remaking of sacred spaces of belonging at various scales. Following the idea that remittances are not merely about economic transfer, but represent an ‘act of translation between different cultural orders’ (Lacroix 2014, 66), I also examine how the transnational circulation of sacralised money operates within a field of meanings and practices associated with moral expectations, entitlements and differentiated value regimes. While it is essential to explore the meaning of religious gift-giving in the Maussian sense – i.e. as part of a sacred economy of moral exchange involving human and divine forces/agents (Coleman 2000; Droz and Gez 2015) – by adopting a multi-sited, ‘follow the money’ approach,

this paper also uncovers the transnational trajectory of sacred remittances, the different circuits they use and the politics of value attached to their 'realization' (Graeber 2001).

The paper is structured as follows. It begins first by discussing ritualistic aspects, the permeability of cash form and the boundaries between this-worldly and sacred regimes of value. Then it examines how sacred remittances inscribe church members within a wider transnational space of circulation before exploring the differentiated social meaning these diasporic actors attach to family remittances and religious donations sent to the homeland. The last two sections explore the power asymmetry associated with the sacralised politics of the gift as well as the conversion of religious donations into 'development materiality'. This leads me to consider to what extent sacred remittances – and family remittances alike – circulate within a differentiated field of value across the transnational divide.

Money rituals and the status of money

An unusual queue has formed in front of an ATM in the high street of an East London suburb, diverting the flow of shoppers. Dressed in their Kimbanguist Sunday best,² several people patiently wait to withdraw cash. Around the corner, in the Baptist church they rent several days a week, the Sunday service has already started. Today is a special day: the aim of the *nsinsani*, the ritual in which the faithful compete in their offerings, is to finance a flagship project of the church, a large museum in Nkamba honouring the life and legacy of Simon Kimbangu. The project has been delayed, so Papa Simon Kimbangu Kiangiani – the church's current spiritual leader and a grandchild of its prophet- founder – has enjoined all Kimbanguist parishes around the world to 'work harder'. The museum is one of the many projects currently in construction in the Kimbanguist Holy City, whose development has been hastened by the prospect of important anniversaries, such as the centenary of Kimbanguism in 2021.

During the *nsinsani* ('competition') groups of parishioners compete with one another, often in a festive atmosphere full of singing, teasing and laughter stimulated by the *animateur*, who encourages individuals to come to the front to bring their donations on behalf of their section.³ Church members in diaspora and the DRC challenge the idea that it is money that brings them together, rather emphasising the collective work (*misala*) to build their church and which enacts a spirit of solidarity which can be traced back to the time when Kimbanguists – seen as a threat to the Belgian colonial order – had to

go underground. However, it is also clear that money is of high ritualistic importance in the church.

During the Sunday service, several collections take place, some accompanied by music or singing, creating a predictable rhythm. Among them is a collection ritual aimed at the extension and maintenance of Nkendolo⁴ residences, inaugurated in 2001. Currently functioning as guesthouses, they were planned for the future use of African-Americans; Kimbanguist prophecies hold that Nkamba is the Promised Land for the black nation, the place to which African-Americans in 'exile' will eventually return.

While the physical maintenance and transformation of this prophetic landscape in the Congo represents the crucial vector through which sacred remittances acquire and realise their values, the immediate ontology of money as materiality also deserves some attention. In his ethnography of Tanzanian Pentecostals, Lindhardt (2015), drawing upon Engelke's (2011) problematisation of materiality as a potent manifestation of spiritual presence, argues that 'money in its most concrete form, tangible coin and bills, becomes an object of mediation in and through which human qualities, hopes, and requests merge with transcendental powers' (2015, 154). In that sense, money is not only an abstract symbol of value, an asset and a medium of exchange; it matters through the social and spiritual forces it substantialises. Religious actors directly engage with this materiality, since they believe that the permeability of cash-as-object – linked to the potential opacity of its origin and its unreliable spatial/social journeys – makes it vulnerable to evil forces. Among Kimbanguists, all donations are purified through prayer, since money can be acquired through theft or immoral means. There is also always the risk that cursed money could inflict harm on the church or its members, delaying the sacred work of building the New Jerusalem on earth. Cleansing money is therefore essential; Kimbanguists believe that money that has been bewitched will act as a fetish (nkissi) and ultimately will be 'unproductive, counter-productive and eventually destructive', as one parishioner explained. Identifying money as a potential carrier of evil forces reflects the general belief that objects are porous, and can be colonised by the devil and its agents to spread their influence from the 'second world to the first' (De Boeck 2004, 207).

Such religious use and understanding of a money-form characterised by its 'indeterminacy and openness' (Maurer 2006, 17) challenges a Maussian separation between gifts defined as inalienable, imbued with part of the donor's identity, and money as seal of value, alienable and generic. Money

can be invested with the giver's (im)morality, as Lindhardt (2015, 153) argues, and as such, the potential divine return can be positively or negatively affected. In the Kimbanguist church, what is given and how it is given is perceived to impact the efficacy of spiritual, and to some extent material, rewards.

For instance, increasing rivalry about the rightful 'ownership' of a chicken farm development project ended up dividing one of the London parishes, creating a conflict about money collections associated with the project. Eventually the farm was set up in Nkamba, but when the electricity was switched on, part of the infrastructure caught fire. The accident was seen by many as a divine response to the fact that the nsinsani money funding the project embodied negative spiritual forces linked to distrust and jealousy, which, in the Congo and many other contexts, is said to sow the seeds of witchcraft (see Ayimpam 2014; Geschiere 2013). Both the money and the gift had become tainted, polluted by the dispute and believed not to have brought blessings to the givers. Rather, the evil forces contained in it reflected the dynamics among the givers, becoming destructive to the gift itself and embodying a symbolic commentary on the 'disorder' accompanying the gift's social life and journey from diaspora to homeland.

Re-examining the social dynamics inherent in a wide range of reciprocal relations, some scholars have sought to transcend the opposition between traditional gift economy and impersonal market exchange (Godbout and Caillé 2000; Graeber, 2001, 160–162; Parry and Bloch 1989, 6–8). In the study of religious dynamics associated with money-giving practices and beliefs, it is also crucial to rethink the supposed autonomy of the sphere of market exchange. As Lindhardt aptly demonstrates in his Tanzanian case study, money's multidimensionality means that donated cash challenges clear-cut boundaries between this-worldly and sacred regimes of value and 'can serve as a point of transfer of spiritual powers into everyday economic affairs' (2015, 154). Among Kimbanguists, even if non-ritualistic handling of money on Sunday is criticised⁵ and even if money is sometimes described in sermons as alienating and potentially divisive by nature, nsinsani money lies at the heart of a religious gift economy. It is imbued with strong spiritual meaning through its conversion into 'development materiality', and through its circulation within a sacred loop linking Kimbanguists worldwide to Nkamba. In this context, money is collective work and development substantialised, part of a wider long-standing relationship between religious subjects and a divine, prophetic authority, personified by the current spiritual leader and materialised within the confines of the Holy City in the Congo.

Diaspora connections and proxy presence

For Kimbanguists in diaspora, sacred remittances act as a proxy presence allowing them to feel ‘anchored’ to both a prophetic space and a powerful aspirational temporality – the promise (*bilaka*) of a godly city-yet-to-come. The ritualised practice of donating is a local collective performance, but since it is endowed with a transnational scope, it acquires an ‘expansive agency’, to borrow an expression from Coleman (2000, 187), who wrote about religious offerings in the Word of Life church as ‘externalisation of the self’. Sacred remittances act as sacred connections, extending the reach of diasporic Kimbanguists’ everyday contexts and allowing them to ‘(re)centre’ themselves in a context of territorial instability and socio-economic marginalisation in the ‘host society’ (Garbin 2010). The centripetal dimension of Kimbanguist territoriality forms a powerful prophetic back- drop to this, and in church discourses and sermons, strong parallels are drawn between the security of future salvation in the Holy City and the insecurity experienced at the margin of the ‘host society’ in the West, a society itself becoming peripheral in many ways:

Our spiritual leader told us we need to get ready to return to Africa, we need to invest, send money. We need to build our house in Nkamba. There are clear signs. *Mama na likambo*, the real thing is coming ... Black people killed every day in the US, xenophobia and racism here, wars, Brexit. One day you are a citizen, the next day you can be deported. All the signs are there ... Also Europe is declining, weakening, Africa is growing, and will catch up very soon. (Kimbanguist, male, 45 from London)

The spiritual liberation of the black nation, the ethos of ‘return’ and the pull of Africa/ Congo/Nkamba have always been strong and recurring themes in the Kimbanguist theology and oral culture (Mokoko Gampiot 2017). However, for second generations ‘born and bred’

in the U.K., who have often very limited – if any – experience of Kimbanguism in the Congo, let alone of life in the homeland, the prospect of ‘return’ is not so straightforward. Through my conversations with these youth, I could appreciate the ambivalence of narratives about the homeland. Often deploring Congo’s political instability and Kinshasa’s lack of material comfort, these youth simultaneously expressed a strong attachment linked to an idealised ‘nostalgia without memory’ (Appadurai 1996, 32) and strongly rejected stereotypical views and ‘heart of darkness tropes’ about the Congo that appeared in the mainstream media. One young Kimbanguist musician who recalled ‘having grown up at home [in London] with the idea of return [to the

Congo] peaking and declining at times, but always in the background’, also told me how there was a real need for Kimbanguists and Congolese in general to ‘invest’ more in the U.K., to improve ‘community recognition’.

In their attempt at maintaining this sense of multiple homes, Nkamba is a great source of pride and commitment for many young British Congolese Kimbanguists I have spoken with over the years. For those who manage to find the time and money to travel to the DRC and visit the Holy City, pilgrimages are nearly always described spiritual resources to revive or strengthen one’s faith. Sending contributions and participating in the development of Nkamba is also highly valued, acting as a proxy presence, especially for those who cannot travel to the Congo. During one pilgrimage to Nkamba with a group of youth from London, I witnessed the importance of this long-distance financial participation:

I have a list of 20 youth who have all donated money. Many of them could not be present for the pilgrimage, some have never been to Nkamba or Congo. But they all want their individual receipts, they want their names on the receipts, they want the official stamp of Nkamba. They are really happy when I bring the receipts back, they see where their money is going. They feel they are contributing and that they also belong here even if thousands of miles away. (London Kimbanguist Youth Leader interviewed in Nkamba)

While long-distance giving and the ‘counter-gift’ of the official stamped receipt are here framed in terms of virtual presence and belonging, it is interesting to see how the materiality of bureaucracy enacts a ‘religion of paper’, which ‘authorises’ and realises the sacred. This materiality is part of a re-enchantment of bureaucratic practices associated with pilgrimage – a tendency I have observed over the years within the church – in a context of increasing administrative/theological recentralisation, securitisation and intensified division of labour in Nkamba under the current leadership of Simon K. Kiangiani. The bureaucratic materiality associated with sacred remittances also operates within a fragmented transnational field, within which competition for recognition and legitimacy, interpersonal conflicts and tensions over ecclesiastic leadership are rife and often play out in Nkamba (Garbin 2010).

A major schism in 2002 is the important backdrop to the increasing bureaucratic ‘re-centring’ of Nkamba. This internal conflict over leadership resulted in the emergence of two different branches: the ‘official’ Kimbanguist church, headquartered in Nkamba⁶, and a group regarded as ‘dissident’⁷ and whose members have lost access to Nkamba. This schism, which has led to

violent confrontations, has created the need for some to challenge suspicions of affiliations to the rival group. For those in the diaspora suspected of sympathies for the 'dissident' branch, affirming and proving a connection to Nkamba is vital, and gaining recognition through a financial link has become an integral part of this process.

This was the case for a group of Kimbanguists in the U.S. who were accused of retaining loyalty to 'dissident' leaders, and who had been marginalised by those who described themselves as 'officially'⁸ representing the church in the U.S. One of the strategies used by the marginalised group to counteract these accusations and regain legitimacy was to demonstrate evidence of their financial commitment to the development of the Holy City through payment receipts and nsinsani trophies collected in Nkamba. Pictures of these material proofs were circulated on social media and in the Kimbanguist public sphere, and while tensions persisted, it allowed members of this group to claim official recognition⁹ and gain allies in Nkamba, where some of them returned for major pilgrimages after years of absence.

Financial ties to the sacred city thus inscribe individuals and groups within a wider transnational space of circulation, sanctioning presence and providing legitimacy, validating and authorising ecclesiastic claims through bureaucratic governance, a bureaucracy, often the source, paradoxically, of a semiotic re-enchantment among the faithful. Nkamba is a highly ritualised space, shaped by prophetic rhythms, hinging on a hetero- topic territoriality (Mélisse 2006) – it is a place 'for prayer and work' (*mabondeli pe misala*), but it is also deeply political for those involved in its (often factional) struggles over recognition or leadership. We shall return to this interplay of power relations, sacred economies and development materiality later after a discussion of the social dynamics of remittances in the transnational domestic context.

Negotiating reciprocity among transnational families

In the recent literature on migrant transnationalism, remittances are shown to express the moral and emotional dimensions of familial ties, revealing the extent to which personhood is socially constructed and 'emerges at the intersection between individual ambitions, on the one hand, and obligations to wider social networks, on the other' (Cole and Groes 2016, 11). Often framed morally and culturally, the trope of 'duty' was particularly recurrent among my informants. For instance, Celestin, a man in his mid-forties who sends money every month to his widowed mum and two of his cousins, discusses his responsibility as the eldest of four siblings:

There is a saying: *Nalia mbongo nayo* – ‘I have to eat your money’. Like I have to taste the money you are earning, a share of it – your family, your uncles, cousins and so on. Family is sacred for us, in African culture. Plus, I am the eldest, so there is a sense of duty, responsibility ... Those who are ‘lucky’ – I say lucky in inverted commas – to be in Europe, they cannot neglect those who are ‘unlucky’ [does the inverted comma sign] to still be in Africa ... It is about duty. If you don’t send them money, people in your family say, ‘Why are you neglecting us?’. ‘You are happy in Europe and you are neglecting us here in Africa, where it is poor’ (‘où c’est la misère’). They think you are selfish if you don’t send money.

This quote encapsulates many of the contradictions and moral dilemmas experienced by Congolese migrants when it comes to negotiating and managing ties – especially financial ties – with their kin in the homeland. On the one hand, Celestin stresses his position in the kinship hierarchy, and his sense of duty linked to the ‘sacredness’ of kinship in ‘African culture’. On the other hand, he notes that migrants are subject to strong familial pressure and the moral scrutiny of kin who expect those abroad to fulfil their obligations or risk shame, dishonour and social stigma. The image of ‘eating the money’ links remittances to a corporeal, essential ‘need’ for nourishment, reinforcing the idea of the transnational family as one organic social body. However, there are also strongly negative connotations at play, since the expression ‘eating money’ (*kolia*, *manger/bouffer*) is also often used to designate selfish, irresponsible use of money and is also synonymous with embezzling and corrupt practices in politics and business.

Furthermore, discussing the asymmetrical reality of migration Celestin relies on multiple dichotomies – ‘lucky’ vs. ‘unlucky’, ‘happiness’ vs. ‘poverty’ – highlighting the importance of what Carling (2014, 237–238) calls the ‘obligation and entitlement remittance script’. This script is defined to a great extent by the ‘structural parameters of migration’, and by the mere fact of being positioned on a particular side of the migration divide, creating a sense of debt among migrant-donors and a sense of entitlement on the part of recipients. However, Celestin’s use of quotation marks suggests a gap in the narrative, an alternative, overlapping register in the language – a semantic distance within the dominant social script. When asked about this nuance, he replied:

I put quotes (des guillemets) because it’s a cliché ... because in spite of appearances, a lot of Congolese are in Europe but they suffer. It’s to show the stereotype, like saying ‘America is the country of opportunities’. In the eyes of Africans Europe is the country [sic] of

opportunities and success. But some really struggled here, for them it was la galère, they should have stayed in Africa ... I put the quotes to refer to the cliché, in Africa some people manage really well In Africa, you eat well with little money. The ones that are in Europe do not earn much and live a stressful life – daily problems, pressure from relatives – whereas in Africa, they are relaxed!

Challenging the trope of opposition between the poverty of the homeland and the wealth/ abundance of the host societies (the so-called money tree syndrome, see Singh 2013, 179) is frequently accompanied by comments on the differentiated value of remittances:

You have this duty to send money; however if you tell them about your debts, your financial problems, they don't understand. Earning money is hard work in Europe. In Kinshasa, people who have been to Europe, they understand. My mum understands. (Interview with French Kimbanguist, in his forties)

As Singh (2013, 178) notes, in the context of transnational migration, 'the value of money is interpreted rather than calculated'. In other words, senders often feel that some of their kin in the homeland idealise the availability of money in host societies and/or underestimate the cost of earning it – 'the dollar sent is not the dollar received' (Singh 2013, 178). The labour, sacrifices and hardship crystallised in migrants' earnings are obscured by their transformation into remittances outside the context of their accumulation, on the other side of the migration divide. Of course, migrants are often complicit in this process and can become caught between the image of success and accomplishment they (sometimes actively) convey and the expectations of non-migrants which they deem inappropriate, demanding or burdensome.

In the Congolese context, there is a strong social pressure to conform to the image of a mythologised West. As De Boeck (2004, 47) argues in his seminal visual ethnography of Kinshasa,

admitting that life in the West often is a life of poverty does not invalidate the topos of the Western Paradise for those who remained behind on the home front. Instead it is interpreted as a sign of personal failure and weakness of the mikiliste [migrant] who followed the trail of the diaspora.

Thus, the 'real' value of remittances can be concealed by the powerful fetishisation of *poto* ('the West') whose imaginary has, for decades, fed fantasies and dreams of glory, success and sophistication, producing the idea of a 'wonderland of modernity' (De Boeck 2004, 46) among Kinshasa's urban

youth, particularly in popular culture and in Congolese music (White 2008). However, I also found that some of my informants were keen to offer a counter-discourse about the West to their non-migrant kin. For instance, a young British Congolese I travelled with for a large pilgrimage in Nkamba commented on the potent symbolic reality of *poto*, describing an interaction with his cousin:

I come from Europe. They see me with my belly and my clothes, they read: *poto*, they read: paradise! [laughs] This cousin asked me if I was to leave my tracksuit behind – I said no way. They think we get things for free. But they are not free! Things are not available for free. I did explain to him that it was 200 dollars. They don't know we have worked hard for it! They don't understand! I told him that money is not given to us, it's not free money! Doesn't mean the same thing to them'. (British Congolese Kimbanguist, male in his thirties from field notes in Kinshasa)

In diaspora, the negotiation of financial ties with kin in the homeland often expresses what Fesenmyer (2016, 125) coins a 'reconfiguration of relatedness'. She describes how, attempting to strike a fine balance between natal family in the homeland and nuclear/conjugal family in London, Kenyan migrants engage in increasingly selective remitting practices, reworking transnational familial relations on newly defined terms, such as providing 'assistance but not support' (2016, 133). Likewise, some of my Congolese sources proudly highlighted the importance of blood ties with the Congo, but also stress their financial constraints, deploring the difficult choices they have to make, and suggesting that conflicted feelings – moral obligations, duty of care, guilt – are intrinsic to migrant transnationalism. While in some Congolese Pentecostal churches, reassessing family relations or even 'cutting ties' with non-conjugal kin is seen as integral to individual progress and 'spiritual liberation' (Meiers 2013), in the Kimbanguist theology or in religious discourses and sermons, this injunction is largely absent. However, tensions can still arise. For instance, non-Kimbanguist family members sometimes struggle to understand why money 'is spent on developing that MuKongo¹⁰ village rather than helping the family more', as one Kimbanguist put it. For some diasporic Kimbanguists, a visit to Nkamba can also involve prospects of stressful demands – 'when we go to Congo, to Nkamba, it's all about calculations, and money pressure so I understand why people avoid their family in Kinshasa' as one London Kimbanguist told me.

If the family 'pressure' some Kimbanguists feel can shape their transnational religious mobility – for example, delaying a pilgrimage to Nkamba – what

impact do financial obligations to family have on the practice of donating to the church? Within what kind of moral and affective transnational circuits do 'sacred remittances' circulate, and how do they compare to family remittances? The next sections will explore how religious offerings are construed and how the development materiality of sacred remittances hinges on a particular politics of reciprocity, blessings and spiritual capital.

Sacred remittances and the spirit of the gift

None of my informants said that donating to the church involved facing difficult choices or financially 'sacrificing' other important expenses. Rather, most talked about the importance of 'never giving half-hearted' (man in forties), or of 'giving freely from the heart' (woman in her thirties) and rejected the idea that donations were calculated transactions, akin to 'buy[ing] blessings as if they were goods on supermarket shelf' (Lindhardt 2015, 154). What emerges is a form of sacred giving combined with purity of intention and individual autonomy – but also inclusion within a wider moral community defined in opposition to the 'instrumental' and personal recourse to the witch doctors or *féticheurs* 'one would pay to solve a particular problem', as one informant put it.¹¹

Additionally, consistent with findings from studies of prosperity theory and 'seed planting' in (neo)Pentecostal context, among Kimbanguists donations lie at the heart of a diachronic long-standing chain linking the donor to God. The gift should not be understood, in other words, as an isolated or self-contained act, since in a deeper sense it represents 'a momentary episode in a continuous social relation' (Sahlins 1972, 86). For many, this explains the paradoxical resilience of prosperity gospel theologies in a context of increasing poverty and socio-economic inequality, when the riches of individual prosperity and progress fail to materialise.

For instance, in her ethnography of Ghanaian Pentecostals, Rey (2015) shows that the absence of blessings or the temporal gap between religious offerings and the counter-gift of blessings creates space of inherent 'indeterminacy', which reaffirms the power of God and transforms longing, trust and patience into devotional agency. For Kimbanguists, the gift is also inscribed in a wider economy of blessings which rewards trustful¹² aspirations and belief in both the divine promise (*bilaka*) of redemption and the (inherited) vision of the current spiritual leader, linking a prophetic past, a sacred and 'active' present, and a future of possibilities. The mission of building and expanding Nkamba – 'our debt to God', in the words of the

spiritual leader – forms an essential component of this temporal chain. The centrality of this rematerialisation of sacred remittances signals the prominent role of monetary circulation, a process often overlooked in recent studies of prosperity gospel.

For Kimbanguists, the creation of sacred value is inherently tied to the idea of 'keeping the flow going' – a rejection of hoarding and financial status as 'sterile' (Coleman 2000, 189)¹³ – and the conversion of resources into physical spaces, equipment and infrastructure becomes a testimony to the entwinement of human action and divine vision. Here, parallels can be drawn between Kimbanguists and the Senegalese migrants of the Murid Sufi order, who contribute transnationally to the development of their Holy City, Tuba, attaining salvation 'not through accumulated wealth but by constantly divesting themselves of money' (Buggenhagen 2012, 88). For both Murides and Kimbanguists the spatial expansion and development of their Holy City is thus an objectivation of an entire process of circulation.

Among Kimbanguists, the redistributive aspects of this process are particularly important, partly because they legitimate the wisdom of the spiritual leader who 'knows' who to help¹⁴ and how to transform the religious offerings into development materiality within a rich repertoire of 'investment' possibilities. Kimbanguists can measure first-hand the 'realised' value of their offerings through the visible spatial transformation of their Holy City, and the hospitality (free food and accommodation) offered to visitors and (some- times prestigious) non-Kimbanguist guests, and to the thousands of pilgrims who flock there for celebrations. The church, many stress, is a social and economic model for the entire nation. It is presented as resilient, financially autonomous, and based upon an inspired and incarnated prophetic vision, projecting a moral community into a social future. The church 'is all about projects unlike some our relatives in Africa to whom we sent money for their daily needs and who lack long term goals, with a Mobutu-era mentality', as one London Kimbanguist told me.

However, such narratives, which provide a contrast between the perceived dependency/ passivity of family members and the powerful religious trope of material and spiritual investment, must be treated subtly. In fact, malpractice within the church is perceived as rampant, and the spiritual leader's generosity is often abused, including by key members of the clergy. If nsinsani offerings go missing, or if those in charge of managing infrastructural funds are 'eating some of the money', it is because (some in diaspora argue) those

working for the church receive little or no payment, reflecting the wider logic of predation and lack of accountability among the underpaid, disillusioned agents of the Congolese state (Trefon 2011, 89–101). Corruption and mismanagement within the church is usually linked to spiritual explanation: the Devil is the greatest of all thieves and witches, its infiltrated agents, are busy slowing down the development and advent of the New Jerusalem.

The belief that Nkamba is the target of malevolent forces is interpreted as a sign that Kimbanguists are on the right path and that the Holy Spirit truly resides there. But why continue to give if there is a risk that money will be stolen, mismanaged or not used for its intended purpose? The spiritual dimension is again salient here, and the following quote illustrates a common view among the diasporic Kimbanguists I have interviewed:

When we give, it's between us and god. God sees what we give. I give with my eyes closed. After I give, I don't think about it. Even if I give £100 and the money is stolen before it reaches its goal, I am ok with it. I don't care. Once you give the money you are blessed but the people who stole, it's between us and God. (Kimbanguist Congolese female, London, in her thirties)

In terms of the moral economy of transnational capital flow, another aspect that blurs the clear-cut opposition between church and family is the fact that relations between members of the church in the DRC and those in diaspora also operate in contexts of structural and material inequality, involving dynamics of 'asymmetrical reciprocity' (Carling 2014). While Nkamba is undergoing a process of religious and bureaucratic 're-centring', diasporic peripheries, with their better access to equipment and technology, have played an increasingly strategic role in providing the expertise and material resources needed for the city's infrastructural development.¹⁵ Not unlike within extended families, the imaginary of *poto* also impacts on the relations between church members in the Congo and their diasporic counterparts. For instance, one youth leader from London deplored the lack of 'depth' in his relationship with some Nkamba clergy members from whom he wanted guidance but who, according to him, only considered diasporic Kimbanguists as 'endless source of money'.

Since internal conflicts and rivalry often play out in the social and politicised space of Nkamba, this structural inequality is also exploited and, consequently, a parallel gift economy has emerged over the years. These gifts take the form of cash in foreign currencies or material items symbolising the modernity and prosperity of *poto* (e.g. mobile phones, laptops, iPads, branded clothing¹⁶).

These gifts are destined to gain the support of clergy in a context of competition for status within or between diasporic parishes, or simply to secure more privileged access to the spiritual leader. These strategies operate at multiple levels of the church's hierarchical structure, creating an intricate network of independent and reciprocal ties linking individuals and groups across national borders, within a global public sphere. These practices in turn reinforce existing tensions in diasporic religious communities and also shape how diasporic actors envision their place and future in the church. The final section, which takes as case study the residential development project pursued by London Kimbanguists, will explore these tensions further.

Contested development and (sacred) remittances landscape

In the migration and development literature, real estate is generally considered an 'unproductive' use of remittances (Smith and Mazzucato 2009) and as a result the spatial dimension of migrant investment and its impact in the sending context tends to be overlooked. However, this 'remittances landscape' (Lopez 2015) is of key significance to the diasporic politics of development among Congolese Kimbanguists. For many Kimbanguist families, the divine 'promise' of a return to the Congo, as prophesied by the spiritual leader, involves a consolidation or a renewed spatial/material presence in the homeland, mostly in Kinshasa but also in Nkamba where some have begun to acquire plots to build small houses. However, in Nkamba, family-based developments by diasporic members have yet to make a significant impact. Rather it is the collective work of developing infrastructural space and residential guest housing that is currently shaping the environment of the Holy City. Thus, various groups within the church, including diasporic Kimbanguists, have been offered the 'sacred task' of leading specific residential projects in an accelerated collective effort to increase Nkamba's accommodation capacity, and to eventually prepare for the prophetic advent of the New Jerusalem which will 'welcome all nations'.

In 2014, after a request from the spiritual leader, Kimbanguists in London decided to embark on their own project. For its design, they commissioned a small London-based architectural firm known to a parishioner. The plan was to build a luxury complex comprising four levels and several dozen rooms, whose fixtures and furniture were designed to symbolise modernity and sophistication while retaining certain religious/Kimbanguist aspects.¹⁷ The ambitious plan, according to a short yet professional 3-D video showed in church, also included a large and lush garden with fountains (although there is no fully functioning running water network in Nkamba), as well as high walls

and a secure front gate – a clear concern for gated privacy contrasting with most of the local urban style. However, those in Nkamba usually involved in the material development of the Holy City objected to the choice of external architects and engineers, and felt displaced and marginalised. For London Kimbanguists, autonomy from Nkamba in the construction of ‘Great Britain’s Nkamba Guest House’ was motivated by several factors. First, there was a strong desire to emulate the rapid and successful development of the large guest house in Nkamba built by Belgian Kimbanguists who, instead of directly sending funds to Nkamba, had decided to ship nearly all the construction material, fixtures and furniture via containers, supervising the construction themselves. Another element that influenced this decision was the experience of Parisian Kimbanguists, who had sent regular *nsinsani* offerings to Nkamba to build their residence, but their project had not progressed; some of the money had been mismanaged or relocated to more urgent needs. In fact, most diasporic Kimbanguists I spoke to expressed little trust in local construction material and, more importantly, in the expertise and reliability of architects and contractors in Nkamba.

Soon after the London-based team flew to Nkamba to oversee the groundwork for the foundations, a conflict erupted between members of the project steering committee belonging to different London parishes (paroissee A and paroissee B), with one group strongly opposed to the idea of outsiders – non-Kimbanguists *mindele* (white people) – ‘getting the blessings for building Nkamba’. The conflict was also fuelled by existing tensions between family factions, and by an older dispute over the chicken farm project, whose ownership had been contested several years prior. After the opposing parties travelled to Nkamba to express their grievances, the spiritual leader enjoined the dissenting group (paroissee B) to carry out their own residential project and arranged a plot to this effect. At the time of writing, this group had begun initial groundwork, employing a local contractor to supervise teams of workers. After the project leader (also the parish leader) was accused of using *nsinsani* money to buy gifts – iPads and plasma TVs – for members of clergy in order to reinforce his legitimacy, some of his parishioners joined the rival project in protest. Meanwhile, paroissee B organised ambitious *nsinsanis* to finance the project, which were met with enthusiasm. They organised a system of rota, ensuring that at least one representative of the parish would be always present in Nkamba to oversee construction and the purchase of some of the material not sent by container (e.g. cement).

The territorial enactment of these diasporic projects in the Holy City forms a ‘representational space’ (Lefebvre 1991) charged with meaning, since the

development materiality is intimately bound up with the transnational circulation of values and ideas about space, shaping the production of the 'remittances landscape' (Lopez 2015). In her study, Lopez shows how in Mexican areas of high emigration, this landscape – punctuated by migrants' lavishly embellished pueblo, or by new collective infrastructures financed by remittances sent from the U.S. – has become highly metaphorical. Transnational material investment practices, she argues, are embedded in power relations and patronage dynamics operating at different scales, a process also notable within the Kimbanguist global public sphere. In Nkamba, tensions over practices introduced by diasporic Kimbanguists – for instance, the use of corrugated iron fences to secure building sites, a practice criticised by locals who would rather use them as roofing material – and the exclusion of local experts also reveal friction surrounding knowledge and norms. The fact that diasporic actors are able to reclaim some autonomy vis-à-vis exiting power structures – deploying significant material and symbolic resources and social capital to that effect, reinforces the uneven geography of remittances. In that sense, this case study reveals the extent to which the sacralised gift converted into what I have called 'development materiality' reflects and enacts a long-standing transnational divide which has the potential to impact local every-day lifeworlds. An interesting parallel can be drawn here with another kind of development materiality, the one linked to the politics of disaster reconstruction examined, for instance, by Ivarsson (2015) in her ethnography of a coastal village in post-Tsunami Sri Lanka (see also Korf 2007). She shows how global 'aid-flows' from Western donors and NGOs dramatically impacted on the moral economy of everyday life, challenging established patron–client hierarchies and creating spaces for the emergence of local development brokers. In a context of rapid socio-economic and material change, Buddhist Monks who acted as recipients of aid money were 'pulled into a system of gift–giving relationships that jeopardized their religious legitimacy in the local community' (2015, 242), undermining, in turn, people's trust in religious and moral structures.

Money, as Simmel argues, is a social force crystallising the mechanism of trust as 'manifestation of confidence in the socio-political organization and order' (Simmel 2005, 178).¹⁸ Among these Sri Lankan villagers as in the case of diasporic Kimbanguists, money, especially money crossing North/South divides, is often associated with mistrust and moral risks. What is clear is that for many diasporic Kimbanguists the conversion of sacred remittances into development materiality outside established circuits of ecclesiastical and bureaucratic authority is seen as a way to negotiate the unpredictability of the homeland environment, a process which in turn locally 'uploads' new

practices and values.

Conclusion

Recent studies focusing on the social and relational aspect of remittances have suggested that migrant money is 'special money' (Paerregaard 2015, 203; Singh 2013; Thai 2014, 193). By exploring the everyday social life of remittances among migrants and those left behind, these accounts have encouraged us to re-evaluate the role and meaning of money beyond its pure market functions, beyond its totemic status as a signifier of disenchanting modernity, characterised, in classical social theory, by a depersonalising power, a 'merciless objectivity' (Simmel 2005, 435). Among migrants and their families, remittances are an intensely personal 'currency of care' (Singh 2013, 176) with the potential to (re)create social linkages between dispersed people. As such, remittances can be understood as a 'form of communicative action' (Lacroix 2014) charged with a range of moral and emotional qualities. However, as a 'currency of status', remittances often unsettle hierarchies, create intra-group tensions or increase dependency and inequalities (Carling 2014; Thai 2014). Focusing on the moral economy of development, this article has shown that these dynamics of social asymmetry are also observable within the transnational social field of a religious movement, even if sacred remittances can act as a proxy presence for those in diaspora. Concurring with Waldinger (2015), I argue that an overemphasis on the fluidity of cross-border material and immaterial connections tends to conceal status imbalances resulting from the differentiated power-geometry of migration and the persistent role of boundaries in separating sending and receiving communities. In fact, as this article suggests, sacred remittances, as 'global money', may generate a diversity of transnational linkages between donors and recipients, but they remain embedded in landscapes of status and power. This resonates with critiques of international development, in particular when it comes to consider (Western) aid as 'gift', embedded in uneven relations of symbolic and material exchange (see Ivarsson 2015; Kapoor 2008).

The article also demonstrated that religious global money is profoundly ambivalent. It lies at the heart of a ritualised gift economy of blessings, but its spiritual permeability is perceived as detrimental to the purity and cohesion of the moral community. While the analysis in this article builds upon the ethnography of a discrete case study, the questions it raises also apply to other religious/diasporic configurations, for instance, African Pentecostal churches that have adopted an explicit transnational scope, with branches in Europe or North America (see Adogame 2013). In the homeland, these

churches often promote spectacular visions of urban development such as the RCCG 'Redemption Camp' complex near Lagos in Nigeria. In order to study these dynamics in all their complexity, this article suggests a need to move from a 'Weberian Protestant ethic' lens – associating the moral economy of religious offerings to cultures of entrepreneurship and 'modern' socio-economic aspirations (Berger 2010) – to a more sensitive focus on the multi-dimensional politics of sacralised money.

Funding

This work was supported by British Academy [Grant Number SG143326].

Notes

1. British Academy-funded project: 'Religion and development in Central Africa: a pilot study of the Kimbanguist church in the DRC' (Grant SG143326).
2. Garments and uniforms adorned with Kimbanguist symbols and the Kimbanguist colours, white and green.
3. Sections include youth groups, drama groups, musicians, choirs, women's groups and several others. Membership to these often overlaps.
4. Meaning 'frontier' in Kikongo.
5. For instance, the selling of Kimbanguist DVDs or clothes.
6. Also coined the '3=1' (in reference to the Kimbanguist 'trinity'), led by Kiangiani.
7. And called the '26=1' (in reference to an ideal unity of the 26 cousins, grandchildren of Simon Kimbangu).
8. This official mandate was also contested and there were tensions over the leadership of Kimbanguists in the U.S.
9. And prepare the grounds for the creation of their own parish.
10. Dominant ethno-linguistic group in the Southern West Congo, where Nkamba is located. Although there are strong Kongo influences in Kimbanguist culture, this is quite a pejorative statement, given the internal diversity of the church and its transnational scope.
11. Recalling here the famous distinction Durkheim (1912 [2007]) made between 'magic' and 'religion' in *The Elementary Forms of Religious*

Life.

12. Trust is a key trope in the moral economy of development among Kimbanguists and the phrase 'faites moi confiance' ('trust me') together with the portrait of the spiritual leader is ubiquitous, visible in Kimbanguist posters, stickers or written on Kimbanguist garments.
13. ‘
14. The spiritual leader personally redistributes offerings to some of those coming to see him daily with requests for financial assistance.
15. And also in terms of the production and circulation of media and Internet content (Garbin and Vasquez 2012).
16. Ironically, most of these are 'made in China' items.
17. Three connected wings symbolising the 'Kimbanguist trinity' and the use of an internal colour scheme inspired by Nkamba topography.
18. Douglas (2001) also considers that without social 'faith' and public confidence in its role, money would lose its efficacy.

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