Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

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Aspirations in Flux: Pentecostalism and the Everyday (Re)Shaping of Middle-Class Identities among Zimbabwean Migrants in South Africa

2. Source

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4. Summary

This thesis examines how Zimbabwean Pentecostal migrants in Johannesburg pursue social mobility, belonging and middle-class status under conditions of legal precarity, xenophobia and economic instability. Drawing on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in three Zimbabwean-founded Pentecostal churches, it shows how migration, religion and class formation intersect in contemporary urban Africa. The thesis analyses Pentecostalism as a religious, social, moral and emotional framework through which migrants interpret hardship, sustain hope and imagine alternative futures. Its central argument is that aspirations remain in motion. Although many migrants arrive with qualifications and expectations of upward social mobility, insecure documentation, exclusion from the labour market, occupational deskilling and anti-migrant hostility make middle-class identity a fragile, ongoing project. The thesis conceptualises this process as 'middle-classing': the everyday performative negotiation of respectability, success and status. Pentecostal Christianity is central to this process. Churches provide spiritual support, social networks, emotional comfort and practical assistance. Through prayer, prophecy, testimony, fasting and worship, migrants cultivate resilience and interpret suffering within a moral universe of perseverance. The concept of 'hope as coping' demonstrates how faith serves as a practical strategy for enduring uncertainty and disappointment, rather than merely as a future-oriented expectation. At the same time, the study highlights the ambivalence of Pentecostal Christianity in migrants' everyday lives. Churches foster solidarity and alternative forms of family and belonging, yet they also reproduce inequalities, moral pressure and hierarchies of wealth, gender, status and spiritual authority. Prosperity theologies can strengthen agency, but may also individualise responsibility and obscure structural exclusion. Gossip likewise functions as a form of social control, reputation-making and moral boundary-drawing, particularly in relation to women, while also enabling criticism and the negotiation of power. Overall, the thesis contributes to debates on migration, religion, class and urban diversity by presenting Pentecostalism as a complex arena in which aspiration, belonging, exclusion, faith and uncertainty converge. Migrants emerge as active agents who mobilise religious practices to sustain aspirations, negotiate identities and imagine meaningful futures despite enduring uncertainty.

Keywords: Pentecostalism; Zimbabwean migration; middle-class formation; hope and aspiration; social mobility; precarity and belonging.