

**Rethinking the Impact of the Church on the Dynamics of Integration  
of Congolese Migrants in Johannesburg:  
A Case Study of Yahweh Shammah Assembly**

***Abstract***

The embeddedness of religious issues within contemporary global phenomena increases the role religion plays in migrant's spiritual, social, and economic lives. This study sought to understand how migrants' churches help situate foreigners within a transforming South African society. Concretely, using a qualitative research approach, the study sought to establish whether affiliation to a migrant's church is a salient form of belonging that fosters migrants' transience and shapes their motivation to integrate into South African society. The population of this case study consisted of a sample of thirty-nine Congolese migrants, members of Yahweh Shammah Assembly ('YSA' in short), a Pentecostal church located in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. The church's membership is predominantly made of Congolese migrants, with few members from other African nationalities.

Overall, this study found that the desire to integrate into South African society remains the main option and ideal for many international migrants coming to South Africa. However, migrant's integrative imaginaries and welfare trajectories are often obstructed by a growing xenophobia within South African society. Many migrants seek full integration and membership within the community but the host society prevents them from achieving this ideal. Acknowledging the fact that a number of migrants came to South Africa with a view not to stay but to use the city of Johannesburg as a transit point to third countries abroad, yet this study found that a significant number of migrants wish to leave Johannesburg because it refused to accommodate them. In this context, the study identified three groups among Congolese community: those in quest of permanent settlement in South Africa, those in transit, and those who want to exit due notably to xenophobic backlash in the country. The study revealed that YSA was

able to integrate Congolese migrants who could not otherwise integrate into host religious institutions. Being primarily an ethnic church in terms of Mullins's model of life-cycle of ethnic churches, YSA focuses on meeting the needs of its members first, before serving the religiously and culturally 'outsider'.

The results of this study together with the rich literature reviewed provide, therefore, a significant theoretical contribution to the understanding of the place of religion within contemporary complex debates on identity and belonging within diasporic communities. It also offers great contribution to the current literature on the dynamics of belonging and integration of migrants in host societies. In addition, this research contains substantial theories and discussions salient to the understanding of the sociology of religion, particularly the interactive relationship between the 'secular' and the 'religious'. Lastly, conducted during the xenophobic outbreak in May – June 2008, this study also gives a more detailed understanding of the dynamics of the widespread xenophobic sentiment and their impact on the integration of migrants in South African society.

**Key Words:** religion, migration, refugee, integration, assimilation, acculturation, Pentecostalism, ethnic churches, culture, identity, belonging, xenophobia, transnationalism.