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Negotiating the present, facing the past: postcolonial politics and transnational youth experiences in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Migration reshapes South Africa's religious and political landscape, yet the experiences of African youth who traverse the continent remain under-examined. Drawing on biographical interviews and participant observation with Nigerian and Zimbabwean migrants in Johannesburg (2024–25), this article explores how young people negotiate xenophobia, post-apartheid inequality and the unfinished business of decolonization through religious and spiritual practices. We show how schools, clinics and urban neighborhoods function as key sites where colonial and apartheid racial hierarchies are reproduced, and where migrants are marked as criminal, excessive or disposable. At the same time, faith-based organizations and everyday spiritual repertoires provide infrastructures of mobility, belonging and political critique, enabling youth to reframe marginalization in Pan-African and theological terms. By bringing postcolonial and Pan-African debates into conversation with lived religion, the article demonstrates how transnational African youth convert traumatic encounters with exclusion into fragile yet meaningful forms of agency and hope in Johannesburg today.

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Introduction

In recent years, global displacement and "migratory movements within the African continent have grown annually" (Grupp et al. 2018, 2). According to Hilario et al. (2017), "local and global conflicts, and increasingly unfair distribution of wealth have shaped transnational migration patterns". With the advent of a democratic South Africa in 1994, the country has become a new destination for African immigrants (Isike and Isike 2012). During the immigration journey, religious organizations and spiritual beliefs play a greater role in migrants' lives. Zimbabwe and Nigeria are among the top ten countries with the highest numbers of immigrants in South Africa. Zimbabwe's geographic location makes it easier for Zimbabweans to cross into South Africa and escape the harsh socio-economic conditions in their country. Yet Zimbabwean migrants are also among the most disliked foreign nationals in South Africa (Dube 2017), and both Zimbabweans

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and Nigerians are frequent targets of xenophobic hostility and violence, increasingly portrayed in public discourse as unwelcome outsiders (Adesina 2019).

These patterns of mobility and exclusion are deeply entangled with histories of colonialism and contemporary mobility regimes, including restrictive visa systems that rank and sort African travelers (Williams 2026). Johannesburg is central to these dynamics. It functions simultaneously as a destination and transit point for migrants within Africa, complicating the Global South-Global North migration binary (Pasura et al. 2026). Young transnational migrants face challenges in "navigating different cultures in destination countries and need more support" (Woodgate and Busolo 2021). Dako-Gyeke (2016) commented that "migration is a multifaceted phenomenon with both positive and negative effects." When receiving countries experience economic declines or high unemployment, migrants exploring real or perceived prospects for enhanced well-being are likely to become scapegoats for the current social, economic and political problems (Adepoju 2006).

In South Africa, many transnational migrants and asylum seekers have been confronted with traumatizing events. Against this background, this article examines the lives of transnational migrants in South Africa and how South Africans cope with the growing number of migrants from other African states. The focus will be on the broader thematic concerns of postcolonial societies perceived as subjects of chaos, mobilities causing tensions with host South Africans, the dreams of continental growth and unity, and xenophobia as a deviation from Pan-Africanism. This article advances the special issue's core argument about religion/spirituality as drivers, infrastructures, and resources for African youth mobilities, as observed by Pasura et al. (2026), namely that "African youth creatively navigate structural inequalities and xenophobic exclusion through embodied, and digitally enhanced spiritual expressions." The three lenses of postcolonialism, Pan-Africanism and lived religion will shed some light on how "the legacies of extremely exploitative institutions of slavery and colonialism were so burdensome and deeply traumatizing" such that African countries are still trapped in its effects (Moges and Muchie 2020, 57).

Literature review

Contrary to popular emphasis on South–North mobility, most African migrants move within the continent, engaging in intra-regional and inter-regional migration rather than journeys to Europe. Countries such as South Africa, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire function as key migration nodes. Global displacement and migratory movements within Africa (Grupp et al. 2018) are driven by recurrent civil strife, which generates mass refugee movements and new forms of asylum-seeking. Local and global conflicts, alongside deeply uneven wealth distributions, continue to shape transnational migration patterns (Hilario et al. 2017). Within this landscape, religious organizations often take on an expanded role in migrants' lives, particularly as they navigate unfamiliar cultures and institutional environments and seek practical and emotional support (Woodgate and Busolo 2021). Across the region, diverse forms of voluntary and forced migration are widespread (Dako-Gyeke 2016).

In South Africa, these dynamics have crystallized dramatically. The year 2008 stands out as a moment of profound disgrace marked by brutal xenophobic attacks against African

foreign nationals: more than 62 people were killed and over 600 were injured (Kumalo 2018), confirming longer-standing concerns about the racialized politics of belonging in the post-apartheid state. Empirical studies of xenophobia are extensive and detailed (Neocosmos 2006), and recent work has further traced how colonial and postcolonial histories shape African youth migration and social identities. Yet, despite this rich scholarship on intra-African mobility, conflict, exclusion and identity, there remains limited research on how young African migrants themselves draw on religion and spirituality to navigate xenophobia, negotiate fractured identities produced by colonialism, and forge new forms of belonging and political critique. This article addresses that gap by focusing on Zimbabwean and Nigerian youth in Johannesburg. Hiropoulos (2020, 105) argues that even though structural forces in African states have fast-tracked migration to South Africa, the South African government has failed to address domestic socioeconomic and political straits, leading to the incrimination of migrants by public officials.

Research methodology

This article is part of an ongoing project seeking to investigate the role of religion and spirituality in constructing youth identities and a sense of belonging among transnational young people of Nigerian and Zimbabwean migrant backgrounds in London and Birmingham (UK), Lagos (Nigeria), Harare (Zimbabwe) and Johannesburg (South Africa). The analysis presented here draws on the Johannesburg component of the study, based on fieldwork conducted between June 2024 and February 2025 with young people aged 15–35. The purpose of the study is to develop a more thorough understanding of the role of religion and spirituality in constructing youth identities and a sense of belonging among transnational young people of Nigerian and Zimbabwean backgrounds in Johannesburg.

A qualitative research design was adopted, combining biographical narrative interviews with ethnographic observation to generate rich, contextualized accounts of young people's lives. The biographical interviews enabled researchers to collect detailed information; they provided participants with an opportunity to share their life stories, including why they left their countries, the journey to South Africa, and their experiences there. Researchers had an opportunity to get a deeper understanding of the key events, decisions, and influences. Ethnographic observations complemented the interviews, allowing researchers to spend more time with participants, observing their engagement and interactions with each other, to see whether what was observed matched the data collected and to gather what was not mentioned during the interviews. This was done by attending church services and social club gatherings, driving around Johannesburg, and visiting a commune where some young migrants live. Researchers also visited the Pastoral Care Centre on days when meals were cooked for young migrants and when food parcels and clothing were distributed to those in need.

Participant selection

In total, 35 participants were interviewed: 23 young transnational migrants from Nigeria and Zimbabwe residing in Johannesburg, and 12 key informants (foreign migrants and South Africans). Thirty-four participants identified as Christian (mainline and Pentecostal)

and one as Muslim. Key informants were selected for their roles as religious leaders, teachers, counselors, and caregivers, and for their experience working with young Nigerian and Zimbabwean migrants. Participants were purposively selected based on age (15–35), nationality (Nigerian/Zimbabwean), and residence in Johannesburg to capture diverse experiences of religion/spirituality in migration (Hignett and McDermott 2018). Snowball sampling was subsequently used, as recruitment required time and trust-building. A limitation was the difficulty recruiting participants identifying with African Traditional Religion (ATR) and Muslim backgrounds, aside from one Zimbabwean Muslim. Some participants drew on traditional beliefs and practices without naming them as ATR (Chitando 2018), and Nigerian Muslims were less concentrated in the inner-city areas where recruitment was focused. In addition, a South African researcher's presence sometimes discouraged participation among migrants with prior negative encounters.

Data collection methods

Biographical interviews

The biographical method was chosen to "get better understanding of young migrants' background, experiences" in childhood and adolescence, their concrete experience of youth organization and school (Rosenthal 2004, 50). As Bornat (2008, 344) notes, this method "encourage a universalistic and encompassing approach, encouraging understanding and interpretation of experience across national, cultural and traditional boundaries better to understand individual action and engagement in society". The narrative approach of the biographical interviews enabled researchers to yield rich data, as it enabled participants to "relate their life experiences and the researchers to hear about the experiences preceding and following the phenomenon in question", and the order in which they occurred (Rosenthal 2004, 50). During interviews, we aimed to minimize interruptions and let participants craft their own narratives, including silence and non-verbal expressions.

Because of the trust issues between South Africans and transnational migrants, we had to work harder to build rapport. What helped was mentioning that the Primary Investigator and the Co-Investigator are originally from Zimbabwe. In building trust and removing their fears, we also had to say that this is a university-based study, which has nothing to do with the South African government, illegal status, or deportation of foreign migrants. Participants were given an opportunity to choose the most comfortable place for meetings. We met in places like churches, pastoral center, coffee shops, and communes where some young transnational migrants live. This was done to make them feel free and comfortable in their space, so they could talk about anything they felt would contribute positively to the study. Interviews were semi-structured, face-to-face, and individual (except for one focus group discussion with key informants and one interview, where two siblings were interviewed simultaneously because they did not feel comfortable being separated). Interviews took between one hour and three hours. An interview guide for the large study was used and adapted to the local context.

The Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG) members assisted in identifying participants, recommending meeting venues, and inviting us to attend the social gatherings and the graduation ceremony. Interviews covered themes such as participants' religious

and spiritual lives, how the church helps them integrate into South Africa, their identity and sense of belonging, and the effects of mobility on their religious and spiritual lives.

Ethnographic observations

Ethnographic observations helped researchers to observe participants' behavior; "studying what they say and do and interpreting what they were actually doing, believe and think" (López-Dicastillo and Belintxon 2014, 524). Extended access to participants helped us understand how cultural and religious processes are enacted and understood by members of that group (FitzGerald and Mills 2022). Participant observation was conducted in Johannesburg, including the Pastoral Care Centre at the Cathedral Archdiocese in central Johannesburg. We attended several masses at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Yeoville. In this church, there are transnational migrants from different African countries. We had frequent visits to the Cathedral Archdiocese in Johannesburg. In this parish, Nigerians have their own special mass on the second Sunday of each month, which we attended. The Methodist Church in Soweto has a commune that accommodates foreign migrants, mainly from Zimbabwe and a few South Africans from other provinces who do not have a place to stay. The ethnographic methodology provided an important vantage point from which we were able to reproduce the realities of the lives of young transnational migrants, as recorded in field notes.

Data analysis

Local teams conducted data analysis and then collaborated with the whole research team through monthly workshops. The software package NVivo 14 was used to facilitate the coding of interviews. Using NVivo to code interview transcripts and field notes, conduct thematic analysis to identify common patterns and themes, and interpret how these themes relate to the research questions of the broader study. For data analysis, the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2023), were applied. Before producing the report, researchers had to familiarize themselves with the data, generate codes, construct themes, review potential themes and define and name themes (Braun and Clarke 2023). Codes were constructed "based on the textual and verbal data and then allocated into categories, eventually classifying them into themes" (Tam 2024, 7). This process enabled us to identify recurrent patterns and to interpret how these themes related to the research questions of the broader study and the Johannesburg case in particular.

As researchers studying a sensitive subject, we had to maintain heightened awareness and be mindful of participants' behavior and actions (Palaganas et al. 2017). We had to avoid any biases and relationships with participants that might have influenced the research process and outcomes. The biggest challenge for us was managing participants' emotions, as the interview sessions sometimes turned emotional when discussing their traumatic experiences (Palaganas et al. 2017). However, our background in trauma healing, community development, and fieldwork experience enabled us to navigate the situation and engage freely with the participants.

When researching transnational migrants in an environment like South Africa, where there is a high level of intolerance against migrants, we had to tread carefully, protecting

participants and ourselves as researchers. We had to "maintain participants' rights to privacy, guarantee anonymity and confidentiality and had to avoid betrayal and deception" (Govil 2013, 18). Some of the measures taken to minimize any potential harm to participants was to be flexible and sensitive to their vulnerability, fears and concerns, like allowing them to choose the meeting place for interviews, with the understanding that some of the participants do not have legal documentation and therefore preferred meeting in very remote areas. Most of the foreign migrants are hustlers, which means they had to compromise their time for the interview. Some did not have any source of income, so we had to provide meals for the duration of the interview and sometimes cover travel costs to get to the venue.

Statement of ethics

Participants were given adequate information about the research and "informed about the power of free choice, enabling them to consent to or decline" participation voluntarily (Rani and Sharma 2012, 45). We maintained ethical standards by stating that participants had to participate in the study voluntarily. When participants agreed to participate, they were asked to sign the consent form to confirm informed consent and consent to publish (anonymized) quotations/data. Since the study involves minors, parents and caregivers of young people were asked to sign the assent forms. The research received ethical approval from the University of Pretoria's Research Ethics Committee (Ref: 04888929; HUM024/0923).

Analytical lenses: postcolonialism and Pan-Africanism

The study is framed around two theories: Post-colonialism and Pan-Africanism. Post-colonialism, broadly speaking, examines how the effects of colonialism have played out in post-colonial societies. In this respect, what the theory will help us understand is how post-colonial societies are primed to be subjects of chaos, as seen in the meltdown of Zimbabwe and many other African states (economically, socially, and politically), leading to mobilities across the border that cause tensions with host South Africans who resent migrants for a variety of reasons. Colonialism refers to the violent seizure and political control of territories by European powers, who used military and economic force to reorganize societies, extract and offshore wealth, and in the process undermine indigenous knowledge, values and institutions in ways that laid the foundations for enduring underdevelopment (Bature and Joseph 2023; Meurs and Ranasinghe 2003). By challenging dominant narratives and questioning the outcomes of colonialism, postcolonialism seeks to authorize disempowered voices and promote a more comprehensive and just world (Bhattacharya 2022). Mishra and Hodge (2005) argue that post-colonialism is not the end of colonization; it is a particular form of colonialism, after a certain moment of high imperialism and colonial occupation. Post-colonialism, as a theoretical framework, examines the repercussions of colonization across varied societal outlooks, including politics, economics, culture, and identity (Enein 2023).

On the other hand, Pan-Africanism, the dream of African unity, is invoked to show black solidarity as well as possibilities of continental growth, unity, and identity. In the face of xenophobia, Pan-African thought can help in understanding how Africa's interactions

have deviated from Pan-Africanism. While colonialism flourished through the rejection of historical culture by non-Western people, Pan-Africanism emerged as a "restorative agency" in this battle for independence and dignity, offering a new stance of repudiation grounded in the historical unity of the African experience. Pan-Africanism is a cultural and political movement that encourages ethical principles, social norms, traditional principles, and customary laws that are the products of the ancient African civilizations (Ebu, Akalonu, and Ozioko 2021). According to, Pan-Africanism glorifies the African past and instills pride in African values like Ubuntu; it constitutes a reaction against the suppression of blacks and the racial doctrines that marked the era of abolitionism. While Ubuntu emphasizes communal harmony, it fails to account for the precarity of youth navigating xenophobia in South Africa or exploitative migration regimes (Matolino 2026). In what follows, we use postcolonialism to read youth mobility as a response to ongoing coloniality in African states and border regimes, and Pan-Africanism to make sense of the tension between ideals of African unity and the xenophobic realities young migrants encounter in Johannesburg.

Postcolonial crisis and youth mobilities

The narratives below show that youth mobility from Zimbabwe and Nigeria is rooted in unresolved postcolonial crises in education, healthcare, and work, rather than in purely individual choice. Even though the formerly colonized countries have political power, what they lack is economic power. Lack of economic power forces a lot of young people from the African states to leave their countries with the hope for a better life in a foreign land, as the following accounts illustrate:.

> I was 11 years old when I left home in Zimbabwe looking for employment and education opportunities in South Africa. Back home, I was staying with my grandparents, and I was not going to school because there was no one to pay for my school fees. I heard from some of my friends that education was free in South Africa (Nathi, 19 June 2024).

Nathi's trajectory reflects both the collapse of public education and the circulation of imaginaries of South Africa as a place where basic rights, such as access to schooling, can still be exercised. This experience is not unique. In the case of Nigeria, migration is primarily about seeking entrepreneurial and better medical care in South Africa, as Zuko explains: "We came to South Africa for medical care because my younger brother had a rare medical condition that needed specialized care" (Zuko, August 2024).

These accounts point to systemic breakdowns that force families to seek education and healthcare across borders. As Udegbunam (2020, 69) argues, "Africa's reliance and ill treatment by its colonial masters negatively impacts the living conditions of millions of people in Africa, generating economic deprivation" and, in certain situations, stirring up political suppression. Post-colonial African states are deeply involved in disputes of differing magnitudes, illiteracy, poverty, unemployment, diseases, poor healthcare services, low life expectancy, and several social ills, such as child-headed households and family separations (Bature and Joseph 2023, 475). Rather than signaling the end of colonialism, political independence has often been accompanied by ongoing turmoil and fragile governance (Sawant 2012). Mlambo (2021), for example, shows how Lesotho and several other African states have, over five decades, been afflicted by constant political

turmoil that has laid the foundation for the collapse of the rule of law, grave human rights violations, lack of development and fragility. This has caused mobility among Africans in search of better opportunities. A young Nigerian migrant related what brought her and her family to South Africa.

These dynamics emerge clearly in Mary's account of onward mobility and fragmented family life:.

> Both parents are hustlers; they do everything and anything. When we came here to South Africa, both started their own businesses. My dad's business was not doing well after COVID, and he decided to move to another country in Asia and left us here in South Africa because he is looking for better opportunities. (Mary, 31 August 2024).

Mary's story illustrates how families are stretched across multiple destinations in search of viability, as parents "hustle" across borders in a volatile regional economy. These narratives confirm that many African countries remain "under the chains of neo-colonialism, for the most part, the prime political economy and socio-cultural ideas, beliefs, norms, values, practices, structures and institutions introduced by the different colonial imperialist powers" were not deconstructed after their freedom (Udegbunam 2020, 69). There was hope that the end of colonialism would lead to socioeconomic freedom after decades of exclusion, inequality and denial of local values and traditions (Mlambo, Masuku, and Mthembu 2024). Unfortunately, many African states exhibited the characteristics of state vulnerability a few years after their independence (Akinola and Makombe 2024). In this context, youth migration from Zimbabwe and Nigeria to South Africa can be read as a response to ongoing coloniality, rather than a simple exercise of individual preference.

Borders, criminalization and the making of "foreigners"

In Johannesburg, colonial borders and contemporary migration regimes produce youth as permanently "out of place" foreigners, even after decades in South Africa. In Africa, "geographical movement is a socio-historical feature of life because in the region, different forms of migration, both voluntary and forced, are widespread" (Dako-Gyeke 2016). The Scramble for Africa was a period of rapid colonization of the African continent by European powers, which created boundaries that led to the separation of African states. The principal aim of European colonialism and neo-colonialism was to capitalize on Africa's human and material wealth by dividing and separating, offshoring, and fencing off resources and disintegrating territories (Matlosa 2005). Mbembe (2019) commented that borders are the word for the organized violence that holds up contemporary capitalism and our world system. In Southern Africa, states are still grappling with the legacies of mass and forced displacement (Crush, Williams, and Peberdy 2005), and these colonial geographies mean Africans are rendered "migrants" within Africa itself.

> I have been in South Africa for more than 20 years, and up to this day, my status has not changed; I am still referred to as an asylum seeker. I don't have a family, and I cannot go back home to Zimbabwe because there is no home, there is no one there, all my family members have died. If I go back to Zimbabwe, who am I going back to? (Pius, 29 June 2024).

Pius's narrative captures the condition of permanent temporariness created by contemporary border and asylum regimes. Despite having spent most of his life in South

Africa and having no remaining family in Zimbabwe, he is still legally categorized as an "asylum seeker". This status fixes him as a foreigner and freezes key life transitions: many in similar situations are unable to complete education, access stable work, or plan.

These dynamics are reinforced by national migration policies that increasingly securitize mobility. The academic debate on the securitization of migration highlights the development of restrictive national migration policies replicating the containment measures of Europe and North America (Khan 2018, cited in Carciotto 2021, 119). Moyo and Zanker (2022, 253) argue that the "conflation of refugees and other migrants has evolved in post-apartheid South Africa" at several levels (legislative, narrative, and policy). Initially the movement of refugees was regulated by the aliens Control act of the apartheid era but, in 1998, a new refugee act was passed the result of these changes included visa types, visa processing requirements and travel requirements; new application forms and application fees; and stricter penalties for non-compliance (Odiaka 2017, 50). These legal frameworks create narrow channels for "legitimate" entry and residence, pushing many migrants into informal and corrupt routes across the border:.

> I was in a bus with my aunt. When we came to the border, my aunt told me to go to the toilet. When I came out of the toilet, she gave me a passport that she took from one of the police at the border. We went through the border, and she took the passport back to the police who had given it to her. (Thando, 19 June 2024)

Thando's account shows how restrictive documentation regimes foster everyday markets in passports and bribes, drawing even very young migrants into illicit economies of movement. Narrow legal channels for entry and residence render many African migrants deportable and perpetually suspect. One of the key informants, Bishop Verryn, commented:

> The issue of transnational migration documents in South Africa is like the apartheid pass laws. Pass laws were a system of laws that restricted the movement of Black, Indian, and Colored people. This was enforced by police who could demand to see a pass at any time. (Verryn, 19 July 2024).

In equating demands for documentation of transnational immigrants, Bishop Verryn was trying to emphasize the cruelty and difficulty transnational migrants face with documentation in South Africa. Unfortunately, immigrants are deemed to be trespassing by illegally crossing a national boundary and becoming illegal foreigners (Crush, Williams, and Peberdy 2005). Demands for papers, constant police checks and the threat of detention all serve to police Black mobility and to reproduce hierarchies of belonging in ostensibly post-apartheid South Africa.

Borders are not experienced only at Beitbridge or at official crossing points; they are continually enacted inside townships and inner-city neighborhoods through raids and "paper checks". Dennis described a raid carried out by the vigilante group Operation Dudula:.

> When members of Operation Dudula forced their way through to our commune in Soweto, they were escorted by the police. I was thinking that the police would stop them from harassing us, but they didn't. We were so scared, we thought we were going to die on that day. We thought they we were going to be killed. They instilled so much fear in us and as they were moving from one room to another, violently kicking doors and screaming "abahambe" others were saying "awahambe lamakwerekwere". Fortunately, no one was hurt or injured. (Dennis, 17 July 2024).

Driving around Soweto, the slogan "*abahambe*" ("let them go") is visible on many walls, a constant reminder of anti-migrant sentiment observed during our fieldwork. Political leaders have openly taken positions that legitimize xenophobia, and these messages filter down to the neighborhood level, shaping everyday attitudes and interactions. Here, the border is performed in the heart of Soweto. Such practices turn homes into quasi-checkpoints and mark young Zimbabwean and Nigerian residents as always potentially deportable. The effects of this regime extend into education and work, as Lucas explained:

> I would like to apply for a student loan, apply for this, or apply for that. If I can get training, the skills I acquire get put back to the economy and put back to the country. But now if I'm unable to do anything, this is what results in crime, okay, look, I cannot go to school and I cannot get a job. (Lucas, 25 August 2024).

"Lucas" was sharing his frustration in not being able to progress in life because he is an undocumented foreign national. This discriminatory behavior is repeatedly justified on the grounds of the economic and social crisis facing South Africa, where around half of the population is said to live in poverty (Neocosmos 2006, 1). Within dominant public and policy narratives, such "illegal foreigners" are regarded as drug dealers, traffickers of children, squatters, facilitators/exploiters of an informal economy, and thieves stealing opportunities from South Africans (Alfaro-Velcamp and Shaw 2016). The narratives show how colonial borders, restrictive migration laws and everyday policing practices combine to fix Zimbabwean and Nigerian youth as permanently "foreign" in South Africa, even when they have lived most of their lives there.

Religion and spirituality as infrastructures of survival and belonging

Against this backdrop of structural and everyday violence, religious and spiritual practices become key infrastructures through which young migrants endure, move and belong. Rather than simply providing private comfort, they offer forms of protection, material support and communal recognition that partially compensate for exclusion from state systems. For many young people, religious objects and devotions accompany the journey itself and are experienced as shields against danger:.

> If I'm not wearing my rosary, I feel like I'm not complete. It's a protection; it protected me along the journey from Zimbabwe to South Africa. When I pray to it, I know that everything will be alright. It's like it's a shield that is from that God. (Mandla, 17 July 2024).

Mandla's account shows how a rosary functions simultaneously as a spiritual technology of protection and as a way of making sense of risky mobility. Similarly, Siyanda described the Good Friday cross as a source of ongoing protection: "Every year, during the Good Friday service, we receive a cross from the church. This is a good luck cross, and it gives me protection, and I pray to it every day" (Siyanda, 19 June 2024).

These narratives, together with our fieldnotes from a Nigerian mass in Johannesburg, where we noticed a few people going to the front and placing objects on the altar. When we enquired about this practice, we were told that people believed that praying for these items would help them open doors to jobs and opportunities.

Religious organizations also provide concrete infrastructures of survival when migrants face acute crises. Jabu recalled how the church became an emergency refuge after a xenophobic attack:.

> When the shelter we were living in was burned down, the church provided us with shelter. Some foreign migrants lost their lives on this day. We didn't have any place to go to; the church people gave us accommodation. (Jabu, June 2024)

For others, churches and faith-based organizations stepped in where the legal system failed. During fieldwork, some undocumented migrants were arrested together with their minor children and, Phindani explains, "The church organized lawyers for us to be released from detention." (Phindani, December 2024). In another incident, when members of Operation Dudula arrived at a commune in Soweto to intimidate and remove foreign nationals, participants described calling Bishop Verryn for help, who then intervened with government officials on their behalf.

Beyond crisis intervention, religious communities give young migrants a sense of everyday belonging and family. As Sakhile explains, "being part of my church community has given me a sense of belonging; they are more like family to me. They provide us with food, clothing and school fees for our children" (Sakhile, July 2024). For Sakhile, church membership creates a substitute kin network in Johannesburg; people met through church and school are "family" in a context where biological family is scattered across borders. Such accounts suggest that faith communities function as everyday infrastructures of care, redistributing food, clothing and education and offering recognition to those cast as "foreigners" in other public arenas. What the religious communities are doing to the foreign migrants is exactly what colonialism took away from Africans when they first came to Africa, the spirit of Ubuntu.

This aligns with what Pan-Africanists advocate, according to Eze. Pan-Africanism glorifies the African past and instills pride in African values like Ubuntu; it constitutes a reaction against the suppression of blacks and the racial doctrines that marked the era of abolitionism. While colonialism flourished through the rejection of historical culture by non-Western people, Pan-Africanism emerged as a "restorative agency" in this battle for independence and dignity, offering a new stance of repudiation grounded in the historical unity of the African experience.

Migration is not just a story of those who leave but also of those who stay behind. For left-behind youth, everyday religious practices (e.g. prayer, communal worship) are not passive rituals but active coping mechanisms that foster hope and identity (Marongedze and Chitando 2026). Lucia, a young Nigerian woman, recounted being left to care for two younger siblings with the same mental condition after her father moved abroad in search of work:.

> My father's business was not doing well, and he decided to relocate to another country. I was left behind with my two younger siblings with the same mental condition. Taking care of them was the biggest challenge and my father encouraged me to keep on praying, whenever I was feeling frustrated. (Lucia, August 2024).

Her story shows how prayer and faith-based encouragement sustain left-behind youth who shoulder adult responsibilities in fragile households. The narratives demonstrate how the religious and spiritual practices are not merely private coping mechanisms. The churches and other faith spaces partially restore the ethic of mutual care associated with ubuntu and Pan-African visions of shared African humanity, even as they operate within, and sometimes reproduce, the inequalities and exclusions of the postcolonial city.

Pan-African ideals vs xenophobic realities: youth critique and imagined futures

Young migrants invoke Pan-African ideals to criticize both xenophobia and ongoing neo-colonial extraction, revealing the limits of Pan-Africanism as a political and spiritual project. In classical formulations, Pan-Africanism emerged as a struggle for African unity and self-determination against colonialism and slavery, glorifying African histories and values such as ubuntu and promoting a sense of shared identity and purpose (Adogamhe 2008). Yet, as Eneji and Umenwaka (2025, 56) argue, Pan-Africanism today continues as a "fragmented and aspirational project that struggles to translate its ideals into enduring structures of continental unity and epistemic sovereignty". The young Zimbabwean and Nigerian migrants in this study both draw on and push against these traditions.

Several participants challenge the portrayal of African migrants as a burden by insisting on their economic contribution and on the costs of exclusion. Edward explicitly reframed migrants as potential drivers of growth:.

> In other countries foreigners help to boost the GDP, they are unemployed, but they are in the informal sector. As of the time I was in high school, foreign migrants contributed about 30–40% of the GDP in South Africa. Now imagine if you tax migrants, imagine if their businesses were registered, how much money you'd be contributing. Imagine if these people were documented, they will have bank accounts. If they had bank accounts, you could tax them on their income. (Edward, 27 August 2024)

"Edward" was referring to the lack of documentation, which has a negative impact on most African transnational migrants' lives. His argument is that if they were legally registered, they could boost the country's economy. "Lionel" also shared his frustration of living in South Africa without any form of documentation.

> There are certain things that happen in life that sometimes you'll be like, you know, what? What am I doing? Let me just go out and make money. Anyhow. This country has frustrated us to the point that we are supposed to have been like criminals. (Lionel, 25 August 2024)

He echoed his frustration over the difficulties he faces due to his lack of a valid South African identity document. He believes that a lack of documentation can lead people to commit crimes out of necessity. These accounts show how undocumented status blocks life chances and generate the very insecurity and criminalization that anti-migrant rhetoric claims to prevent. Udegbunam (2020, 69) echoed that "for Africa to prevail over the problems of neo-colonialism and its instruments, in order to accomplish absolute economic and political independence", the continent should fight and act in opposition to the outside influences which have vested interests in keeping it impoverished. Other young people extended this critique beyond South Africa to continental patterns of extraction and underdevelopment. Patrick imagined an alternative future in which African states control their own gold production and value chains:.

> If Africa unites, we can make gold ourselves, don't we? South Africa produces gold like we are mining gold. What would happen if we had refineries that refine gold into jewelry, and we export them to overseas countries? We can charge them whatever money we want. But if we don't, what happens is white companies are coming to South Africa. They mine gold in South Africa; let's say they mine it at a discounted price, maybe $1 per ounce. They take it to the United States. They make gold or diamond necklaces, and then they sell it to us at

> $12, something they bought from us at $1. They bring it back to us at 12. Who is losing? (Patrick, 25 August 2024).

Patrick's narrative condenses a sophisticated critique of global commodity chains and imagines a Pan-African industrial strategy that would keep value on the continent. Joseph similarly read wars and political instability in Africa as consequences of divide-and-rule tactics that prevent such unity:.

> Nigeria has oil-producing mines. It also has gold. And another country has gold. Guess what? Who enjoys it? The Europeans. Because in Nigeria, sometimes fuel prices are crazy. That's the whole divide and conquer concept […]. And the way to solve this, personally, is first with the leaders and first deal with indoctrination, because they're indoctrinating the youth into thinking their fellow brother is their enemy. (Joseph, 25 August 2024)

Joseph links xenophobia directly to neo-colonial resource politics, interpreting anti-migrant sentiment as a "smoke screen" that prevents Africans from recognizing their shared interests in resisting external exploitation.

At the everyday level, young migrants experience stark contradictions between Pan-African ideals of unity and the xenophobic realities of South African streets, schools and clinics. Xenophobia is an intolerance related to a process of social and political ostracism of some groups of the population. This adds up to a process of social rejection by the community (usually, but not exclusively, the nation) and of citizenship (its resources, entitlements, respect, obligations, etc., or some of these) for such groups (Neocosmos 2006). Vandeyar (2011, 9) states that these xenophobic attacks are brutal verbal and physical acts being targeted at Black immigrants by their Black South African counterparts. The year 2008 will live on in memory as the year of disgrace in South Africa, in the history of the cruel xenophobic ambush on African foreign migrants. According to Kumalo (2018, 1), more than 62 foreign migrants lost their lives and over 600 were injured in this period. Participants recounted insults, assaults and discrimination rooted in their status as "foreigners", yet some also emphasized practices of coexistence and mutual learning. Beyond economic marginalization, young migrants also encounter xenophobia in everyday institutions such as schools and hospitals. Julian recalled a violent attack in the schoolyard:

> "I was stabbed inside the school premises by a South African boy who was my classmate … just because I am a migrant. … when I reported the incident to the principal, she couldn't do anything because she was also a migrant, and she feared for her life." (Julian, August 2024)

Here, both pupil and principal are positioned precariously. Julian is targeted as a foreigner, and the migrant principal feels too vulnerable to intervene. Zinzile described a similar exclusion in a public healthcare setting: "My brother was admitted in hospital for a very long time because he had a rare disease that needed specialized care … I decided to sleep in hospital most of the time so that I could take care of him." (Zinzile, August 2024)

These accounts show how schools and hospitals, key sites where Pan-African ideals of solidarity and ubuntu might be expected to materialize, can instead become spaces where African migrants are made to feel unsafe, unwelcome and unworthy of care. Against this backdrop, some participants emphasized practices of coexistence and mutual learning:

> "Let us learn to coexist. Some of us have South African friends that we get along very well with … Having South African friends helped me to learn South African languages … This protected me when there was a xenophobic attack because I was able to communicate in the same language with those guys who were attacking foreigners." (Sheila, 31 August 2024)

Sheila was emphasizing the importance of learning other people's languages to promote oneness. Having South African friends has enabled her to learn different South African languages. Her call to "learn to coexist" draws implicitly on Pan-African and ubuntu-inspired ethics of mutual recognition, even as it acknowledges the risks of violence.

Young migrants are acutely aware of how political leaders mobilize xenophobia for electoral gain. Russel, a Nigerian participant, described this process during the 2024 elections:.

> Now the politicians are using this to incite their people to get more votes. You see, it's already bad enough; how much more do they want to push the issue of xenophobia? We're the ones who affect the same thing exactly, and that just makes us hate South Africa. That makes us hate South Africa more. We hate these people. We hate everything that's going on and that shouldn't be the case. We shouldn't hate each other. You see, we're all brothers and sisters. If I'm able to help you, I should be able to help you, and if you are able to help me, you should help me. (Russel, 17 July 2024).

Russel simultaneously condemns political incitement and reaffirms a Pan-African ethic of mutual aid: "we're all brothers and sisters." Sylvia went further, framing xenophobia as a deliberate strategy to deflect attention from state failure and corruption:

> "The country is going down; they need a scapegoat … It's the foreigners' fault … instead of policing their leaders, they fight with the foreigners … once they shift the blame to the foreigners, its problem solved for South Africa government." (Sylvia, 11 August 2024).

This was Sylvia's reaction to the claim that foreigners were taking jobs that were supposed to be given to South Africans. The understanding of post-apartheid xenophobia must elicit the history of the connections between apartheid state politics and the politics of defiance. The question is "how do we harmonize the presupposed Pan-Africanist kindness of the likes of the former Senegalese president with the xenophobic violence on the *Makwerekweres* in South Africa?". Shared identity built on ethnicity or nationalism can have negative consequences when it operates based on beliefs to disguise class differences in the service of the privileged class's economic interests (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2006).

These narratives highlight the enduring damage of colonialism, as African people now inflict on one another forms of violence once directed at them by colonial regimes. The victims of xenophobia are African migrants from across the continent; in public discourse, groups such as Nigerians and Mozambicans are routinely singled out and associated with crime, drugs and "illegal immigration" (Verryn 2008, cited in Vandeyar 2011, 9). Such practices run directly against the spirit of Pan-Africanism, which seeks to forge unity around a shared struggle against racism and exploitation (Sherwood 2012). As notes, Pan-Africanism aspires to renew and unify Africa and to cultivate a sense of oneness among peoples of the African world, an aspiration sharply at odds with the xenophobic exclusion of fellow Africans in South Africa today.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Zimbabwean and Nigerian youth mobility to Johannesburg cannot be reduced to individual choice but is rooted in postcolonial crises of education, healthcare and work. Their trajectories reflect the "melting" of African economies, as Matolino (2025, 177) echoes: "so-called political freedom did not translate to true social and economic empowerment," and social rights, pushing young people and their families to stitch together survival across borders. At the same time, colonial borders and contemporary regimes of securitization, documentation and policing combine to fix these young people as perpetual "foreigners": asylum seekers who never become residents, students who cannot enroll, workers who cannot formalize their labor, and long-term inhabitants who remain deportable in law and in public discourse.

Within this hostile environment, religion and spirituality emerge not simply as post-arrival coping mechanisms but as drivers, infrastructures and resources in youth migration projects. Crosses, rosaries and ritual objects travel with them as protective technologies and horizons of hope; churches and faith-based organizations function as alternative welfare and legal infrastructures, providing shelter, food, school fees and legal representation; and faith communities offer spaces of belonging where "foreigners" are recognized as family. Finally, the narratives of Pan-African economic imagination and everyday xenophobia reveal both the limits and the enduring power of Pan-Africanism as a political and spiritual frame. While xenophobic attacks, slogans such as *abahambe* and the criminalization of African migrants starkly betray Pan-African ideals, young Zimbabwean and Nigerian migrants draw on Pan-African and religious vocabularies to criticize neo-colonial extraction, resist scapegoating and insist that "we are all brothers and sisters". In doing so, "that would be able to humanize the African through resuscitating traditional values" Matolino 2023, 80), expose the unfinished business of decolonization in South Africa, and, at the same time, sketch fragile but important visions of more just and genuinely Pan-African futures.

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