# Globalization, sense of belonging and the African community in Tel Aviv-Jaffa[1]

Tovi Fenster and Ilan Vizel

## ABSTRACT

*The paper examines practices of belonging in African migrant labor communities of Tel Aviv-Jaffa in the 1990s and early 2000s. It focuses on the physical and symbolic locations of the churches they established, together with the migrants' reflections on new practices of belonging adopted by these communities. We argue that these new practices are flexible and multi-layered, connected to various aspects of the migrants' identities. Thus, belonging to a place is not necessarily related to one coherent and solid aspect of identity; rather, it may be a temporary attachment that is full of contradictions, laden with feelings of rejection and otherness. Nonetheless, this attachment is powerful; its power lies in the fact that it is experienced through many different aspects of the individual migrant's identity.*

## Introduction

In this paper, we analyze physical and symbolic practices of belonging in African migrant labor communities of Tel Aviv-Jaffa[2] from the 1990s until 2004, looking at the *establishment* and *location* of their churches, as well as the multi-layered, flexible nature of belonging that has been constructed through the *functioning* of the churches. Such an analysis, we argue, contributes to existing theoretical discourse on place and belonging in the era of globalization.

Construction of a sense of belonging to a place is not necessarily related to a coherent and solid aspect of identity. Rather, it may be a sense of attachment that is full of

---

1   This paper is part of research financed by the Israeli Science Foundation (research no. 06910732).
2   Tel Aviv-Jaffa is the official name of the city that consists of Jaffa, the pre-1948 Palestinian city, and Tel Aviv, the first "Hebraic" city. The two became one municipality after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948.

contradictions, saturated in feelings of rejection and otherness, and only temporary. Nonetheless, this attachment is powerful because it is experienced through many aspects of one's own identity. Such a multi-layered and temporary belonging–which is most relevant to the contemporary human experience–has not yet been discussed in the literature.

Another point elaborated here is the tight connection between African churches in Tel Aviv and the global network of African churches. This global network is not based on capital or communication technologies, like other global networks, but rather on solidarity–belonging–and shared religious, cultural and organizational norms. This last point allows us to discuss the interrelations between practices of belonging to a place on a local scale and practices of networking on a global scale.

Our first visit to a Christian church established by African labor migrants in the southern neighborhoods of Tel Aviv was in December 2002. We wanted to understand the nature of their communal activity and asked ourselves how–and if–these people experience a sense of belonging to the city, despite their "otherness" and their illegal status as undocumented migrants. In that period, before the establishment of the migration police, they still had a vivid and active community lifestyle, running more than 30 independent churches of their own (Sabar, 2004). Those churches operated in a rather secret manner, located in rented basements and structures which formerly served as light-industry factories in south Tel Aviv.

A dramatic shift took place in the summer of 2002,[3] as the Israeli government hardened its position and its migration policy, taking measures of massive deportation of any undocumented labor migrant. Under these new circumstances, the Africans, like most other labor migrants, learned to avoid any unnecessary activities in public spaces in their leisure time. Many stopped going to church, fearing police raids. Gradually, most churches were shut down. In those churches still functioning, the atmosphere became rather unpleasant, as so many pastors, choir singers and members were deported. In every service, considerable time was devoted to the collection of money to help members who had been arrested, some of whom were being held for months. Deportation became the most prominent aspect of their everyday lives, and, in fact, we were witnessing a sad process of the communities' disintegration and degradation of those practices of belonging that they had established for many years. Precisely for this reason, we claim that the current research contributes to existing

---

3    A report published by the Inter-ministerial Committee for the Issue of Labor Migrants (July 2002) led to the foundation of the Migration Administration, with a special task force of 400 policemen and a budget of 45 million U.S. dollars. The Migration Administration was meant to deport undocumented migrants, and by November 2005, over 136,000 migrants had been deported from Israel. Many others left of their own will, due to the new circumstances.

knowledge as related to situations of remoteness, detachment and deportation that characterize contemporary practices of local belonging and global networking.

## Belonging and a sense of place in the era of globalization

The last decades have witnessed an academic revival among sociologists, anthropologists and geographers in the discussion of the evasive feeling referred to as "sense of place" (Ahmed et al., 2003; De Certeau, 1984; Fenster, 2004; hooks, 1990; Massey, 1994; Relph, 1976; Rose, 1995). Many of these studies raise the question of how global economic and cultural flows affect the manner in which people experience a sense of belonging to place. Can a person see herself/himself as belonging to a certain place in a world where global webs of telecommunication challenge the existence of spatial borders? Do global flows of millions of migrants from place to place challenge the old, supposedly homogeneous, identities of places?

Literature written on socio-spatial interrelations in the context of globalization has been characterized by a tendency to underestimate the importance of place in people's identities. Concepts such as "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1990), "disembedding" or "deterritorialization" of identity (Eade, 1997) and "flows" (Bauman, 1998; Castells, 1997), which illustrate this tendency, are used extensively and perhaps too loosely when discussing how contemporary identities are forged. We will not elaborate upon this criticism, as it has been thoroughly discussed, mostly in the writings of such feminist scholars as hooks (1990), Massey (1994) and Ahmed et al. (2003).

It is Massey's (1994) contention that the intensive movement characterizing contemporary experiences of life only strengthens in many ways the human need to belong to a place. Globalization, Massey claims, has not diminished a sense of belonging to a place; on the contrary, it has created it. In fact, she reminds us that the very discussion of concepts such as "belonging to a place" and "a sense of place," at its earliest stages (Relph, 1976), was about something that is lost forever with the appearance of "global" elements. Massey and other feminist writers (Ahmed et al., 2003; hooks, 1990) emphasize the oppressive aspects–especially towards women–of such a nostalgic approach towards place.

Massey's emphasis on otherness in the discussion of a sense of place has contributed to the contemporary discourse of place and identity, emphasizing diversity rather than homogeneity and focusing on social power relations as important factors in investigating a sense of place. She claims that belonging is primarily a feeling constructed at a certain place and time. Time-space compression does not dismiss or "deterritorialize" a sense of belonging to a place, but changes its forms, the places and the moments in which such feelings are constructed.

Rejecting the idea of a "natural" attachment between identity and place, some geographers (De Certeau, 1984; Fenster, 2004) have theorized a sense of belonging to

place which is constructed gradually over time, through daily spatial activities of people (De Certeau, 1984) and through growing feelings of safety, comfort and commitment (Fenster, 2004). An important emphasis in these theories is that constructing a sense of belonging does not necessarily require physical presence in a place: people may develop a sense of belonging to a place they have already left, or even to a place that they have never been to (Ahmed et al., 2003). The diasporic consciousness is an obvious example of a group living its life in one place, though its tight roots of belonging lie in another (Cohen, 1997). These theories will be analyzed through the story presented in this paper. First, however, we wish to briefly address the existing literature on the African labor migrant community in Tel Aviv.

## The establishment and location of African churches in Tel Aviv

Israeli sociologists and geographers (Alfasi and Fenster, 2005; Kemp and Reichmann, 2000; Schnell, 1999; Schnell and Alexander, 2002) associate the arrival of labor migrants in Tel Aviv with processes of glocalization occurring in the city since the 1980s: transition from an economy of industry to an economy of finance, communication and information services, as well as a growing independence from the national government in Israel. This migration was accompanied by the establishment of churches by the immigrant communities, particularly the Africans–a common practice among migrant groups in general (Sabar, 2004).

African migrants are characterized as black, Christian and undocumented,[4] living within a majority of white Jewish citizens of Israel. Their presence–even when it lasts for years–is always temporary, with no hope of achieving any form of recognized citizenship (Sabar, 2004). Such extreme exclusion from society, claims Sabar, only strengthens the status of their church as an autonomous protective space in which they can be themselves. Indeed, she terms their churches as "islands of Africanism," adjusted to Israeli realities, but also a source of dependence. Because of these contradictory factors, the church becomes an intense space where everything becomes extreme (Sabar, 2004).

What distinguishes African church activities in Tel Aviv from those of other labor migrant churches abroad is their attempt to keep a low profile. This strategy is manifested in their non-missionary activities and avoidance of any "publicization" of those activities among the Jewish-Israeli public. Even their choice to hold weekly prayers on Saturdays rather than Sundays is explained by church leaders as a means to avoid overexposure

---

4    The vast majority of African migrants in Tel Aviv, in the years before the massive deportations, were undocumented.

of community members in the crowded streets of the neighborhood on Sundays, as well as the financial loss of a workday (Sabar, 2004).[5]

Following Sabar's research, we now discuss the geographical perspectives of the churches as *places* in which a sense of belonging is shaped and developed. We will focus on their establishment and the choices of their locations.

### The establishment phase: African "pioneers" in Tel Aviv

The migrants' narratives of the establishment phase of the churches are characterized by expressions like "pioneers" or "preceding generation," which, besides emphasizing the beginning of this process, also expose some dualities in their expressions of belonging, especially between the individual's sense of belonging and the collective sense of belonging. Such "pioneering" narratives, we claim, reflect a *collective* will for long-termed continuity of the community in the city; at the same time, each of the migrants, as an *individual*, describes his/her stay in Israel as temporary.

Pastor George[6] describes the 1980s as the time of the "African pioneers" in Israel[7] and uses terms such as "first generation" and "second generation" to implicitly refer to the power relations existing between veterans and newly arrived migrants. These terms, used in the "pioneer" narratives, imply a community wishing to establish its roots in the city.

The churches were the spatial manifestations of these wishes. Though they initially set out to be private, informal and limited gatherings of a few friends who met to pray together, soon the churches became large social institutions, taking a central role in the absorption of thousands of African migrants arriving over several years and in the construction of a certain social order within the community:

> For instance, I personally have the view that if those of us who came to Israel first, years ago, had not begun these things, most of the influx of Africans would have ended up on their own, and we can just imagine the social implications–they would be in the discos and messing around. But the pioneers that came here started with Christianity and the ways of the Bible. … We know other countries where Africans have been removed; they didn't have a good start like this [in Israel] (Pastor George, April 2003).

---

5   In Israel, being a Jewish state, the weekly day of rest is Saturday, and Sunday is a regular workday.

6   Pastor George heads the local "Redemption Church" and is a prominent leader in the African community in Tel Aviv. He is in his forties and was one of the first African migrants to arrive in Israel.

7   It is important to mention that the first African labor migrants arrived in Tel Aviv on their own initiative a few years before the Israeli government decided to recruit thousands of "foreign workers." A small African community existed at the margins of Israeli society, arousing no public attention.

In George's opinion, the "pioneers" established the moral behavior of those to come. The churches they founded in Tel Aviv aimed to inculcate certain norms of behavior among the people of the community–not only Christian norms, but also norms that would help the community keep a low profile and avoid public awareness in Israel, so as to prevent conflicts with local institutions and people. This approach, says George, is a result of the bitter experiences of African labor migrants who were deported from other countries.

In this respect, we can understand the story of the African churches in Tel Aviv as a collective attempt to set up a stable and long lasting community life even though, from the very outset, each of the migrants saw their stay in Israel as temporary. The pioneering leaders used the churches as a means to construct a sense of belonging that bridges this duality.

## The spatialities of belonging: The location of the churches

*Why Tel Aviv?*

Unlike labor migrants from other countries, the majority of African migrants chose to live in Tel Aviv, even though many considered themselves not only labor migrants, but also religious pilgrims to whom the holy city of Jerusalem might have been more appealing. Their choice was mainly due to the greater employment opportunities in Tel Aviv, as well as the municipality's recognition of their residency and offers of help, whereas the Jerusalem municipality either ignored them or followed the State's official policy vis-a-vis their illegal status (Alfasi and Fenster, 2005; Fenster and Yacobi, 2005). Moreover, once the "pioneers" established their first churches and communal ties in Tel Aviv, African migrants that arrived later found it easier to settle in these existing "spaces of belonging." This trend may be seen as an expression of the importance of their community ties and sense of belonging and how difficult it may seem for individual migrants to stay away from their community centers in Tel Aviv. Another possible explanation for their need to gather as one community in a single geographical space may be the fact that their "otherness" is racial. Studies show that a community whose "difference" is more prominent is likely to gather geographically, so that its individuals will experience a stronger sense of belonging to the community, which serves as a mechanism that helps them deal with feelings of alienation and exclusion (Fenster, 1996).

*The location, relocation and visibility of the churches*

What kind of *place* were the African churches in Tel Aviv? Looking at the place and locations of the churches, we identified three related spatial aspects. First, all churches were located in the poorer southern quarters of Tel Aviv. Second, most churches were relocated several times. Third, for a short while, the churches changed from being nearly "invisible" places into obvious well-known sites in the city.

Most of the churches were initially located near the migrants' residences, which were in the poorer southern quarters of the city–Neve Sha'anan, Shapira, Ezra, Ha'argazim, Florentin, Kerem HaTeymanim and Hatikva–where most other labor migrants also lived. Low rents in this part of the city,[8] its proximity to the central bus station and a common belief among undocumented migrants that it is easier for individuals to avoid police pursuits in areas highly populated with migrants (Schnell and Binyamini, 2000:111) made this region an attractive center for labor migrants, particularly the Africans (Fenster and Yacobi, 2005).

Though these areas were known publically as inhabited by labor migrants, in the first decade of their activities, the African churches established there operated virtually "underground": they were undocumented and their spatial presence was rather secretive. No signs in the street indicated the exact location of the churches, and their entrances were intentionally discreet. In order to enter one church, for instance, you had to enter a shop, then walk down a staircase to the basement where the church operated–a path known only to the Africans themselves. This turned the African church into an invisible place, with no official address; it was virtually unknown to most people in the city. However, this anonymity by no means weakened any of the church members' sense of dedication to it.

Finding a suitable location for the churches was a difficult task, for two reasons. First, the community wanted to keep some distance from the central commercial streets in the area, known as places of drug dealing and prostitution. Second, it wanted to keep its distance from streets where the local residents complain about loud music from the churches on Saturdays. Considering those two limitations, the churches adopted, at first, a strategy of "spacing out" (a term used by Pastor George): dispersion of small churches among several streets. This kind of spatial distribution was convenient for all the churches in two senses: it reduced competition between them, and it helped them avoid creation of a single concentration of churches that would attract wider public attention. However, as all the churches grew larger, with the incoming flux of African migrants, large groups of believers started gathering in residential neighborhoods on Saturdays, at times eliciting hostile reactions. Cases of violence between the migrants and the local residents, requiring police intervention, were reported.[9] At this point, the churches had to change their spatial strategy and move out of the residential areas.

---

8    According to Schnell (1999), an attempt to populate these neighborhoods with Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s was unsuccessful, and by 1993 more than half of the apartments were left abandoned. They were available and cheap by the time the labor migrants started to arrive in that year.

9    For example, in September 2002, residents of the Hatikva neighborhood demonstrated against the opening of an African church in their neighborhood. Many violent incidents resulted from the

By the end of 2004, most churches were located in two adjacent buildings on Levanda Street (Figure 1). Those buildings had been occupied by light-industry factories in a non-residential area; they were chosen so that the churches could function at late hours and on Saturdays without complaints from neighbors. The churches were now more spacious and convenient than the basements used before. But relocation was also expensive, and the proximity of the churches to each other threatened to destabilize each independent community, as it was seemingly easier for church members to start visiting other churches. Another negative aspect, from the migrants' point of view, was that they were now more noticeable. From an area housing light industries, Levanda Street became, at least for a while, one of the largest and most active Christian spiritual



Figure 1: One of the largest active Christian spiritual centers in Israel during the 1990s: churches located on Levanda Street, Tel Aviv.

---

confrontation between church members and Israeli residents. Eventually, the church relocated. This story was covered in the Israeli media (Ahser, 2002; Sinay, 2002), but many similar stories of churches that were forced to relocate owing to the pressure of local residents were not published (Center for the Aid of Labor Migrants, 2002; but see Avrahami, 2001).

centers in Israel. Churches were no longer invisible: on Saturdays, one could see African men and women, members of different churches, most of them dressed in traditional clothes, crowded on the pavements of Levanda Street. Moreover, the street became their social and cultural "city center." People gathered in groups outside the churches. At the entrances to the buildings, women would sit and offer merchandise they brought from their home countries for sale. On the walls, inside the building, migrants would post messages, a major means of communication between members of all churches: wedding announcements and advertisements for different services given by community members, usually in English for the benefit of migrants from all African countries. At last, the African community had found its "city center," which made it more vulnerable, but at the same time established a sense of belonging to a specific place.

## Belonging as a multi-layered construction

Having analyzed the physical and symbolic construction of belonging expressed in the establishment and location of the churches, we now wish to identify the multi-layered characteristics of the sense of belonging which developed in the churches. African labor migrants' narratives show that they perceived their sense of belonging as based not on one aspect of their identity, nor on one narrative of belonging to place, but rather on different layers that together formed their sense of belonging. Their belonging to global "imagined communities" of Christians and of Africans also carried local expressions: the Christian sense of belonging turned their Israeli experience into a "pilgrimage" from which a unique sense of belonging to a place developed. Furthermore, their sense of belonging to global Christian and African communities eventually materialized and was spatialized locally within their churches. This means that even the most "global" and "imagined" forms of belonging are eventually manifested as a sense of belonging to a specific place.

*A sense of belonging to the local community: The "new family"*

Migrants expressed their deep sense of belonging to the local community, referring to it as an intimate and loyal "family," despite their awareness of the temporary nature of their stay. Many migrants indeed came to Israel in the wake of a relative–brother, sister, uncle–and usually attended the same church as their relatives. Thus, though this was not a community comprised of one extended family, almost every member in the church had a number of relatives within the community, and so a sense of familiarity and belonging was maintained.

The churches were the most central places in which this sense of belonging was constructed because they were the most common places for social gatherings. There migrants could meet up with wider groups of people than their close circle of friends and family. When fear of deportation increased, the churches became "safe" havens to

meet "new family" members, as they believed the police would not arrest them within the churches.[10]

This sense of belonging to the "new family" was deeply affected by repetition of rituals within the church itself, not only of prayers, but also of practices of rearrangement of the church space, like people do at home. For example, each Tuesday evening, members would arrive at one of the churches on Levanda Street, sometimes directly from work, and before the ritual began they would all–regardless of their position in the church–move the plastic chairs from the center of the hall to its sides, in order to allow for a ritual that includes free movement within the church space. Fenster (2004:184) shows that an individual's ability to shape a space according to her/his private needs strengthens the sense of belonging to that place. In this case, these are the rituals of a community expressing its collective belonging to a place as home. Moreover, as most church members spent most of their day cleaning houses which were not their own, it was through this collective ritual that they could express their individual belonging to the church as their home.

Another example of collective rituals that reinforce a sense of belonging to the "new family" is the "call and answer," a common ritual in African churches the world over (Taylor, 1994). When a pastor or other church member sings or preaches, the whole crowd reacts, usually calling out "Amen" or any other spontaneous response. Another common ritual is dancing and praying in a circle. The joining of the individual voice with the collective one creates, according to Taylor, a sense of equality among all participants, including the leader. Unlike Taylor, we do not interpret these rituals as expressions of equality, but rather as expressions of belonging of all members, of all positions, to a united community, which is perceived as a " new family" in a symbolic home–the church.

Another ritual expressing the sense of belonging to the "new family" is the "testimony," given by each member in front of the community about himself/herself and his/her belief. Many testimonies are highly personal, and the fact that they are shared with the whole community is an indication of the deep intimacy and trust between community members.

These practices of space rearrangement, "call and answer" and "testimony" were held to enhance and make visible the "new family" constructions of belonging in the church. For the community of African migrants in Tel Aviv consisted of a group of people who were strangers to each other before coming to Israel, many of whom even spoke different dialects. As visitors in their churches, we noticed the efforts made to

---

10  The Ministry of Interior and the Migration Administration formally avoided direct intervention in the migrant churches: "We do not arrest in churches … but I'm not saying that there are no exceptions" (Officer Orit Nahmani, from the Migration Administration, addressing Parliament, Dec. 16, 2003).

overcome these difficulties. Prayer services were held with simultaneous translation to English or another colonial language used in the home country of most church members, so that people from different regions in that country could understand. Only during weddings, funerals and namings of newborn babies was there no such translation. We interpret this as a means to maintain a sense of intimacy that is created within the community. The relatively large number of married couples with children added to this sense of family. Some of the churches organized a special section where children could watch cartoons with Bible stories, so that they would not interfere with prayers.

In sum, the church was the symbolic "home" for many African migrants and its members were their "new family." As such, the church promoted family values, and many single migrants married within the community. This sense of belonging was enhanced by repetitive rituals–not only religious ones, but also those of the most mundane maintenance activities. These were performed with the participation of the whole community, thereby strengthening the members' sense of belonging to the place. This sense of belonging to the community as a family is constructed with the knowledge that it is only a temporary construct and can be terminated at any time.

*A sense of belonging to the "global" Christian community: Pilgrims in Israel*

Many African migrants viewed themselves not only as labor migrants, but also as Christian pilgrims. Spirituality was partly why they chose Israel as their destination of migration. Such a perspective adds a new dimension to their sense of belonging in Israel; they see their sense of exclusion, otherness and short-term stay as part of their religious experience: "We are immigrants, we come here to work. … But we believe that we are in the Holy Land and that here Christ was born. If you are here, you are blessed. … It's like a pilgrimage that every Christian wishes to be here" (Pastor Johnson, February 2003).

In Pastor Johnson's[11] words, we can find two intertwined narratives: one of a labor migrant ("we come here to work"), the other of a pilgrim ("it's like a pilgrimage"). Both narratives reflect a sense of belonging to a place that is temporary–neither the migrant nor the pilgrim intend to stay in the place they have arrived at. But since they are already here, they deepen their sense of belonging not only in the economic, everyday sense, but also on a spiritual level.

Indeed, many of the migrants described their presence in Israel–especially the visits to holy places–as an experience that made the biblical stories they learned since childhood alive and more "real":

---

11   Forty-year-old Pastor Johnson, from Nigeria, was among the founders of *The Cross and the Star Church* in Tel Aviv, and its head pastor. He worked at the church voluntarily, in addition to his day job cleaning private houses.

Actually, I came to visit, to see the land, to see what is real from what we learn in the Bible. And it's a great opportunity, because you come and you see at least some of the things you've been hearing and reading about. I've been to Meggido, Caesarea, Nazareth and Jerusalem (Grace, April 2004).

[In Israel] you feel a sense of real connection. The Bible comes alive. When you are in Ghana, you know the stories from Genesis, Exodus, the New Testament. … I've been to the grave of Jesus on the Mount of Olives (David, April 2003).

This experience of pilgrimage, according to Grace[12] and David,[13] "connects" them to their Christian identity. Pilgrimage becomes a deep essence of their identity, giving another meaning to their daily life beyond the hard physical labor occupying most of their time. This perspective of their pilgrimage also makes it easier to cope with the fear of being arrested and deported. In this way, they integrate both aspects of their local belonging–as pilgrims and as labor migrants–into one story:

I'm from Ghana and I'm in Israel; they [the people of Israel] are from Israel and they're in Egypt. … God tells them, "go to Egypt, there's food there." And they go there and they bring food. So maybe I'm from Africa and we don't have a lot of money there, or jobs. So I come here for money, and you [the Israelis] are chasing me out. And God says, "Don't do that, because you've been there before, and now you are doing it to somebody else." And you are doing it. And you are disobedient to the words of God. So God says, "If you do that, I will punish you." But I pray that that punishment will never come upon Israel (Stephen, May 2003).

The biblical story of the Hebrew "labor migrants" who had traveled to Africa (Egypt) in search of food was used by contemporary African migrants as a reflection of their own story. This story was told and retold by preachers in their churches, and was mentioned in many interviews and conversations with us. It enabled the migrants to tell their own migration story within a religious discourse inspired by transcendental meanings. It also helped them to sharpen their criticism of Israeli society, by using a story that is well known to Israelis.[14]

---

12  Grace, 31 years old, lived in Israel five years before she returned to Ghana due to the deportations. She worked as a cleaning woman, but also invested a great deal of her time studying Christianity and was a certified pastor, though she had not served in that role formally in a church.

13  David, 30 years old from Ghana, lived in Israel for seven years. He worked cleaning houses, but also studied computers and volunteered as a translator in the church. He was married in his church.

14  Many of the organizations supporting labor migrants in Israel use this story as a public relations strategy. A fine example of this is a booklet published by the Center for the Aid of Labor Migrants (2002). Entitled *Because You Were Aliens*, in biblical Hebrew, it alludes to a famous passage in the book of

Another major Christian narrative that the migrants used to tell their own story was that of the life of Jesus. They told it as a story of alienation within Israeli society:

> It's interesting, like in Israel, you see what is going on now–they are always chasing the foreigners. When you go to church, you forget all of this. … Because we hear the word of God and we know that it has happened before, even here in Israel, when Jesus came (John, January 2004).

For John,[15] the church is a home where he can "forget" his feeling of being chased, or at least find a new perspective, as something that happened even to Jesus. In such a narrative, his persecution by the immigration police is "a cross that he has to bear" and therefore a realization of his Christian identity.

Like John, Grace also described the ministry as a place where she felt safe, even safer than in her own apartment:

> They cannot do any harm to our ministry, because wherever we go, we go with our God. … And even if they stop all the ministries, God will bring the ministries back. It's a prophecy, there's nothing you can do about it. You cannot destroy the ministry of God (Grace, April 2004).

Grace believed the churches themselves could never be damaged, because even if one ministry were shut down, she and her friends would always be able to reopen it somewhere else. This feeling of belonging to something that cannot be destroyed can perhaps be expressed in the well-known saying, "wherever I hang my hat, it's home."

In sum, we have seen that Christian identity strengthens the African migrants' sense of belonging in Israel, and that their stay in Israel strengthens their Christian identity. Christian identity gives a positive meaning to even the most negative aspects involved in their local experience, such as alienation and persecution. Above all, Christianity gives them some spiritual tools with which they can construct their churches as homes where they feel safe, despite the deportations.

*A sense of belonging to the "global" African community: Global networks of the African diaspora*

Beyond the evident sense of belonging to the local African community in Tel Aviv, the church also helps its members to construct a wider sense of belonging to a global

---

Exodus, chapter 23, verse 9: "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt."

15  John, 30 years old, married with a two-year-old daughter, had already been in Israel for six years when we met him. He was a member of the church choir, and saw his singing as the deepest expression of his Christian faith, as well as of his belonging to the community.

African community. A major aspect of this layer of belonging is the organization of churches in Israel as part of a global network of African churches.

Before embarking on this analysis, however, we would like to explain why we refer to such a variety of communities, whose migrants arrived from different Africa nations, under a single inclusive label: "the African labor migrant community in Tel Aviv." The differences between communities are best apparent in the languages used in the churches and in the traditional dress that some members wear, which distinguishes migrants of different nationalities. However, despite national and cultural differences, we justify our generalization in that all African labor migrants in Israel share some characteristics that distinguish them from other groups of labor migrants that are not African, such as: the large number of families in all African communities; the geographical concentration of almost all African migrants in Tel Aviv[16]; similar employments common to all African migrants[17]; and the practices of joint organizations of Africans of all nationalities.[18]

Almost all African churches in Israel were related in one way or another to African churches in Africa, the U.S., Canada, Europe and other places in the world. We identified two patterns of networking on a global scale. The first is churches in different countries that are "branches" of a center located in Africa. Such churches have maintained, from their very beginnings, tight relations with their center in Africa. The second pattern is networks of autonomous "twin churches," connected directly with each other, independent of any center in Africa or anywhere else. Different churches are established in different places throughout the world, initiated locally by migrants. In this case, relations between the twin churches develop gradually over time.

*The Cross and the Star* is an example of a church of the first type, as it is spread globally, with a spiritual and administrative center in Nigeria. Pastor Johnson describes the connection between the branch in Tel Aviv and the center in Nigeria as a tight one, maintained daily through the use of global communication technologies. A sense of belonging to a global network of churches is also expressed in the participation of migrants from different African countries. Indeed, in some ceremonies, we even found several Philippine or South American migrants. As it happens, the expression of globalization in this church is threefold: in the global network of churches to which it belongs; in the use of global communication technologies; and in the local activity at the church, which bears some multi-national features.

---

16  Geographically speaking, the spread of African labor migrants in Israel is clearly unique. While almost all Africans concentrate in Tel Aviv, labor migrants from other places are more evenly spread throughout the country.

17  Most African migrants were employed as cleaners in private homes and small businesses. Being unregistered, they worked as freelancers, unattached to any contractor.

18  For example, The Union of African Workers in Israel was one such organization. In addition, the African churches organized an umbrella organization with representatives of each church.

The *Redemption Church* is an example of the second pattern of global networking of twin churches:

> We are unpatroned and independent. … We started here. We are not privileged to be a part of a bigger organization. We pray that in the future it will be a bigger something. However, we have relations with other sister churches, in Ghana, New Zealand, the U.S.A. and that kind of thing. We invite people from these sister churches (Pastor George, April 2003).

Pastor George does not refer to the autonomy of his church as an optimal situation, and emphasizes the importance of belonging to a global network. His church invested efforts in the search for new connections with churches around the world, so as to create a network that would eventually become more stable and institutionalized. Until that time, however, the role of this network was more symbolic. The local activity in the *Redemption Church* was not multi-national, as was that in *The Cross and the Star*, and almost all members were Ghanaians.

Comparing these two examples may teach us something of the principles of the "glocal" functioning of African churches. First, a stable and institutionalized organization of churches around the world contributes to a more stable multi-national and cosmopolitan local activity in each of them. Second, strong relations between the local churches and the center in Africa may stabilize such a global organization.

Belonging to a community that is spread globally is also expressed spatially inside each church. For example, the symbol of the *Redemption Church*, hanging over the central stage, is an image of an opened Bible holding a globe; at its sides are six flags from the countries in which the twin churches are located (Figure 2). Such images do not express a nostalgic belonging to the homeland they have left, but rather to the global landscapes where they search for opportunities.



Figure 2: Multi-national symbolism: Pastor George at the Redemption Church.

## Epilogue

The story of a community of African labor migrants in Tel Aviv clearly emphasizes the temporal nature of a sense of belonging to a specific place in the era of globalization. It also shows the power of such a sense of belonging to affect the lives of people, as well as urban spaces.

The African churches were the most central and important elements in the construction of a sense of belonging within the African community in Israel. At their peak, they reached thousands of members and were tied to each other in relationships of solidarity and cooperation, as well as intensive competition. Within two decades a large number of churches were founded, were relocated often or were shut down, but the norms characterizing them were maintained, providing their members with a sense of stability and, above all, a sense of belonging to a community and to the place. All of this took place within a hostile environment, under the growing threat of deportation forced by the government.

Let us now reexamine some of the theoretical assumptions stated at the beginning of the paper regarding the interrelations between identity, belonging and place:

*A feeling of safety may strengthen a sense of belonging to place, and some practices of belonging may strengthen the feeling of safety.* Like Kemp and Reichmann (2004), our research suggests that the churches were perceived as a "safe space" for the migrants. It also shows that the migrants perceived the churches as a mechanism of constructing a sense of belonging that could easily be relocated or refounded if they were to be shut down by national authorities. This may be seen as a practice of belonging that may be very useful for people experiencing migration.

*Belonging, in an era of globalization, may develop in respect to more than one place, and is multi-layered in its identity constructs.* The African migrants in Israel developed a sense of belonging to different places in Tel Aviv, Israel, Africa and the rest of the world. Some of these places were more closely connected with specific aspects of their identities either as Christians or as labor migrants. In the church, their sense of belonging was experienced through all aspects of their identity: as Christians; as pilgrims; as labor migrants; as Ghanaians, Nigerians or people of any other nationality; as members of a local African community; as members of a global Christian-African community; as family members hanging out together; and as amateur musicians in the choir. The churches were not merely "Islands of Africanism", as termed by Sabar (2004), but rather places saturated with various meanings and layers of belonging and identity.

*Belonging to a place is individual as well as collective, and ambiguity may develop through these two layers of belonging.* Fenster (2004) shows that a feeling of belonging and commitment towards a place may develop into a "sense of staying"–a conscious decision to remain in that place on a long-term basis. Here we conclude that each individual's "sense of staying" may be different than the collective "sense of staying" of the community as a whole. The individuals saw their stay as temporary, while as a

community they told a narrative of a long-term, almost permanent stay. It is possible that the ambiguity between the individual and collective senses of belonging to a place may be seen as another characteristic of belonging to place in an era of globalization.

*Different spatial practices produce different "types" of belonging and attachment to a place, and vice versa*. The presence or absence of an individual or a community in a place cannot be examined in terms of finite or dichotomized values, but rather must be seen as spatial practices subject to interpretations. For years, the African churches were both present and absent; they existed for their members, but were hidden from the awareness of most others. Over the years, the churches grew larger, and their presence become more obvious, which led most of them to concentrate spatially on one street. At this stage, not only were they present, but their presence changed the nature of the street.

*A sense of belonging to a place is a power-relation construct, but it also affects the construction of power relations.* The African labor migrants' sense of belonging was structured within a complex power-relation system in which global, national, municipal and local actors took part. The migrants were one of the weakest groups within this system because of their fragile status as illegal residents. Nonetheless, we have seen how they managed to find their way in the power-relation hierarchy through the church systems and, through them, to construct their sense of belonging to the city. This success should not be taken for granted: it is enough to compare it with the nostalgic claims of the loss of sense of place due to globalization, which reflect a bourgeois-white-male discourse (Massey, 1994). The migrants' practices of belonging were not those of resistance to globalization; rather, they were an effort to take advantage of global networks such as the churches.

# References

Ahmed, Sara, Casta da Claudia, Fortier, Anne-Marie, and Sheller, Mimi. (2003). "Introduction," in Sara Ahmed, Claudia Casta da, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller (eds.), *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration* (pp. 1-19). New York: Berg.

Ahser, Ittay. (2002). "The labor migrants' church closed." *Ma'ariv*, September 29 (Hebrew).

Alfasi, Nurit, and Fenster, Tovi. (2005). "The national city and the global city: Jerusalem and Tel Aviv in an era of globalization." *Israeli Sociology* 2:265-293 (Hebrew).

Avrahami, Idit. (2001). "The prayer was stopped." *Ha'Ir*, June 22 (Hebrew).

Bauman, Zigmunt. (1998). *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Castells, M. (1997). *The Power of Identity*. London: Blackwell.

Center for the Aid of Labor Migrants. (2002). *Because You Were Aliens*. Tel Aviv (Hebrew).

Cohen, Robin. (1997). *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. London: UCL Press.

De Certeau, Michel. (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Eade, John. (1997). *Living the Global City: Globalization as Social Process*. London & New York: Routledge.

Fenster, Tovi. (2004). *The Global City and the Holy City*. London: Pearson.

—. (1996). "Ethnicity and citizen identity in development and planning for minority groups." *Political Geography* 15,5:405-418.

Fenster, Tovi, and Yacobi, Haim. (2005). "Whose city is it? On urban planning and local knowledge in globalizing Tel Aviv-Jaffa." *Planning Theory and Practice* 6,2:191-211.

Harvey, David. (1990). *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford: Blackwell.

hooks, bell. (1990). *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*. Boston, MA: South End Press.

Kemp, Adriana, and Reichmann, Rivka. (2004). "'Ho God! Make me invisible': Evangelic churches and labor migrants in a Jewish State," in Yossi Yonah (ed.), *Whirlpool of Identities* (pp. 108-131). Tel Aviv: Van-Leer Institute (Hebrew).

—. (2000). "Aliens in the Jewish State: The new politics of labor migration in Israel." *Israeli Sociology* 3,1:79-110 (Hebrew).

Massey, Doreen. (1994). *Space, Race and Gender*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Relph, Edward. (1976). *Place and Placelessness.* London: Routledge.

Rose, Gillian. (1995). "Place and identity: A sense of place," in Dorin Massey and Pat Jess (eds.), *A Place in the World? Places, Culture and Globalization* (pp. 87-132). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sabar, Galia. (2004). "'I'm a black Christian illegal migrant worker in Jewish Israel': African Christianity in Tel Aviv," in Aviad Kleinberg (ed.), *Religiosity in the Israeli Context* (pp. 30-78). Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press (Hebrew).

Schnell, Itzhak. (1999). *Labor Migrants in Southern Tel Aviv-Jaffa*. Jerusalem: Floresheimer Institute for Policy Studies (Hebrew).

Schnell, Itzhak, and Alexander, Michael. (2002). *Urban Policy for Labor Migrants in Tel Aviv-Jaffa*. Jerusalem: Floresheimer Institute for Policy Studies (Hebrew).

Schnell, Itzhak, and Binyamini, Yoav. (2000). "A model of social-spatial segregation of labor migrants in Tel Aviv." *Israeli Sociology* 3,1:111-132 (Hebrew).

Sinay, Ruty. (2002). "In Hatikva neighborhood they say, 'The foreigners can pray, but not here.'" *Ha'aretz*, September 27 (Hebrew).

Taylor, Clarence. (1994). *The Black Churches of Brooklyn*. New York: Columbia University Press.